

The Early Roman Expansion into Italy

Elite Negotiation and Family Agendas



Nicola Terrenato

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This book presents a radical new interpretation of Roman expansion in Italy during the fourth and third centuries BCE. Nicola Terrenato argues that the process was accomplished by means of a grand bargain that was negotiated between the landed elites of central and southern Italy, while military conquest played a much smaller role than is usually envisaged. Deploying archeological, epigraphic, and historical evidence, he paints a picture of the family interactions that tied together both Roman and non-Romans aristocrats and that resulted in their pooling power and resources for the creation of a new political entity. The book is written in accessible language, without technical terms or quotations in Latin, and is heavily illustrated.

NICOLA TERRENATO is the Esther B. Van Deman Collegiate Professor of Roman Studies at the University of Michigan, where he specializes in first-millennium BCE Italy, with particular reference to northern Etruria, early Rome, and the period of the Roman conquest. Since 2007, he has directed the Gabii Project. He is co-editor of *Italy and the West: Comparative Issues in Romanization* (2001), *Articulating Local Cultures: Power and Identity under the Expanding Roman Republic* (2007), *State Formation in Greece and Rome* (2011), *Roman Republican Villas: Architecture, Context, and Ideology* (2012), and *A Mid-Republican House from Gabii* (2016).

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NICOLA TERRENATO

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor



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*To my old colleagues in the Department of Classics at the
University of North Carolina*

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Preface

This book was already in the making when my beloved children, who are now teenagers, were far from being born. It started its long, intermittent gestation in the late 1990s at the University of Durham, where a Leverhulme Fellowship had providentially extracted me from the wreck that my academic career in Italy had somehow become. There Martin Millett had invited me to teach some classes of the core undergraduate course in Roman archeology. The idea was to preface the bulk of the course, which dealt with the conquest of the western provinces, with a short block of lectures on the Roman expansion in Italy. Confronted with the unfamiliar task of summarizing in a few hours the very rich material that was endlessly dissected in courses back home, I was forced to look for an entirely different scholarly genre from the one in which I had been operating to that point. I was reminded of the kind of discourse that I had admired in Henry Wright, during a life-changing experience as a visiting graduate student to the university where I now serendipitously teach. In trying to apply it to the Roman world, I was heavily influenced by Martin's use of archeological evidence to produce radically different historical narratives for Britain and Spain. But Italy, with its extensive textual tradition, its hundreds of thousands of inscriptions, had typically only been the subject of syntheses written by ancient historians, even if archeologists like Mario Torelli had begun breaking that monopoly and were moving in innovative directions. It was as if from the very edge of the empire, perched on Hadrian's Wall, I could contemplate the peninsula with a compendious gaze that I had not even thought possible while I was mired every day in its endless archeological detail.

It also happened that, in looking for readings in English that undergraduates could use, I could only find standard text-based historical handbooks arranged in chronological order or site-specific archeological studies. It seemed that there was an opportunity to write a book of a different kind, one that would attempt for central and southern Italy the kind of more interpretive, holistic synthesis that had been developed in other contexts. I therefore put together a synopsis that Cambridge University Press was kind enough to consider, encouraging me to submit more. So during the

ensuing two decades the book project followed me to Chapel Hill and then to Ann Arbor, constantly evolving, in keeping with my changing ideas about the Roman expansion in Italy. It has been reconceived, discussed, abandoned, and picked up again over and over, until the time came to bring it to fruition or drop it for good. In the end I reckoned that it was best to let it come out and see what reception it would get. Before doing that, however, a few words about its aims, premises, and structure are in order.

Perhaps too optimistically, this book attempts to be a number of disparate things at once. At a basic level, it retains the original goal of presenting a combined archeological and historical synthesis of the Roman expansion in central and southern Italy during the fourth and third centuries BCE. It is meant to require little prior knowledge and is aimed, among others, at students and the educated general public. For this reason, it does not take for granted any of the concepts, terms, and processes that are familiar to all classical scholars. It avoids untranslated words and quotations in Latin or Greek and even citations of ancient authors in the standard format.¹ Names of cities and historical characters are given in the most accessible form, rather than the original. While I understand that untranslated words and original names are a convenient form of shorthand for our circumscribed academic community, for other audiences they pose problems. Besides the steep learning curve that students face when confronting these textual practices, their use has had a major impact in separating the study of the classical world from that of the rest of the human past.² Even worse, these conventions have contributed to a discourse of social exclusion that has made it objectively harder for those coming from underprivileged backgrounds to read and to write about Greece and Rome. These hurdles are still in full force today, and they have hampered the progress of our discipline, depriving it of the creative contributions of a broader intellectual and social constituency. Even if the grammar of our discourse has not changed for generations and now appears immutable to us, it can and it should be questioned with fresh eyes in light of the cultural and political circumstances of the present day. In short, this book quixotically attempts to make its subject matter at once more accessible and more productively embedded in the general, global archeological and historical discourse. In the service of this goal, it summarizes much more and in different ways than most other books dealing with this context. For instance, it eschews the

¹ Only references to Livy in the Oxford University Press translation are given, with the traditional reference system in parentheses

² A point discussed in Terrenato 2002; Terrenato 2013

sequential, event-based format that is so commonly used to narrate the early part of the Roman expansion, with its countless wars, colonial foundations, and magistrates, in favor of a hypothesis-driven exposition. In doing this, it borrows most notably from historical anthropology, attempting broad interpretive constructs and thematic overviews.³ I struggled hard to find an existing plane that felt adequate to the kind of argument that I wanted to develop. In the end, I concluded that I would have to define my own, by combining elements of anthropology, archeology, and history. I offer it for consideration as the only option I could find that did justice to the vision of the process that I had developed over the decades.

The other aim of this book is to change our understanding of the very nature of the Roman conquest of central and southern Italy, in addition to reorganizing and retelling its story. In my perception and intention, the reconstruction presented here flies squarely in the face of key assumptions that have stood virtually unchallenged for centuries. Most notably, it gives to non-Roman people powerful agency and decision-making power, way beyond the doomed resistance that they have been at best credited with. Indeed, I envision a grand bargain between elites across the peninsula that would have been the main catalyst of its political unification. Furthermore, I argue that factional networks spanning across cities and ethnic groups were more important than the opposition between political entities such as states and alliances. Finally, I conclude that Rome itself, far from changing drastically the socioeconomic structure of Italy, was itself transformed beyond recognition by the expansion process, which turned it into a federal capital that was shared as a political arena by elites converging on it from across the entire alliance to negotiate their deals about power and integration.

While this approach reacts, in theoretical terms, against nationalist constructs on one hand, and against the mechanical processes of materialism on the other, it does not fall back on traditional, Collingwood-style idealism, centered on great individuals and high culture. Rather, in a nutshell, it strives to break down monolithic views of states and power, making space for clashing factional agency that is driven by cultural constructs.⁴ The emphasis is shifted from political abstractions, like Rome or the Roman alliance, to actual actors in the process, endowed with their own goals and loyalties. Their power relationships can and do change depending on context and over time.⁵ Especially in the case of

³ For instance, the level adopted in White 1991

⁴ Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Yoffee 2005

⁵ Ehrenreich, Crumley, and Levy 1995

elites, individual or factional action can trump the monopoly on power and violence that states are supposed to have.⁶ These elites are vertically integrated with their subordinates through tight hegemonic relationships that are however not purely one-sided.⁷ In keeping with a historicized understanding of structuralism, all these agent behaviors are expected to be constrained by cultural norms and mentalities. In the worldview espoused by the present book, historical change is produced by the complex interaction of the mentioned local agencies with global socioeconomic trends.

In analyzing the developments that resulted in the Roman state of 200 BCE, I use interchangeably the terms conquest, expansion, unification, empire-building, and imperialism. No implication of greater Roman agency is meant by that. They are used as neutral placeholders that point to a very complex phenomenon. There seems little to be gained from defining them much further or in making any fine-grained distinction of meaning between them. I could not find a single good, comprehensive word that adequately described the political process as it is reconstructed here. At the same time, I avoided the concept of hegemony, since it seems much more tightly connected to ideas of cultural predominance and hierarchy. The state resulting from the unification is conventionally called the Roman Empire, even if it was a republican system and if non-Romans had a very significant role in it. All dates are intended BCE unless otherwise specified.

It should also be made clear that very little of the evidence presented here is the result of my own work in the field or on the texts. Even at the interpretative level, significant pillars of my argument have been provided by the innovative work of other scholars.⁸ A considerable quantity of new data and new ideas have been recently published by Italian archeologists and historians, but have only in part been taken into account in the global debate. A key approach here is to collate together elements that have tended to stay in separate discourses. I confess, however, to having juxtaposed and combined such material in the service of my own personal vision of the process, which at times deviates substantially from their original intent. In doing this I am conscious of taking a great liberty and a risk. My hope is to broaden and stimulate the debate, even if I do not convince everyone. This is a trope in book introductions but it is literally meant here.

⁶ Oakley 2014

⁷ See Chapter 2; also van Dommelen and Terrenato 2007

⁸ E.g., Torelli's work on local senators or Bradley's on colonies; Torelli 1982b; Bradley 2006

Advancing a very controversial new idea, certain to be met with strong criticism and even outrage, requires a herculean effort of synthesis. One cannot rely on a vast body of allied literature but must necessarily create a whole worldview, which is not based on a single line of evidence but rather on the combination of a wide variety of indicators that have not been recruited for this purpose before. As a result, each of the chapters that follow condenses a much greater amount of information than is customary in our discipline, while at the same time often presenting fundamentally alternative interpretations of it. Doing justice to Syracusan empire-building in eight pages or to Roman colonies in seven is of course an impossible task, and yet one that must be bravely attempted if one wants to present the argument in full within a book of readable length. It also means that the bibliography must be kept to a few essential texts and cannot cover the entire relevant literature. Even so, the number of works cited approaches a thousand. Apologies are offered here to the scholars whose works, even if relevant, have not been included. In short, a whole book could easily have been dedicated to the topic of each of the chapters that follow and this would have been the safest course. But it is precisely in the interaction between them, in the synergy between the disparate lines of evidence, that resides the best hope of being persuasive. If this book is to have a chance of turning a new page in the debate on early Roman imperialism, it has to reconsider the whole question with fresh eyes and without subscribing to existing predominant models or even area-specific syntheses.

The structure of the book is neither chronological nor thematic. Rather each chapter makes a discrete argument that contributes to a comprehensive investigation of early Roman imperialism. Thus [Chapter 1](#) deconstructs the historiography of Roman imperialism to show that there are unquestioned assumptions inherited from centuries ago that still tightly constrain our discourse today. [Chapter 2](#) argues for the existence of long-term socio-political structures that were already in place in the early first millennium BCE and that had a major role in explaining later events. A geographically broader overview is offered in [Chapter 3](#), making the case that early Roman expansion can only be understood within the context of similar processes happening elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The conflicts between Rome and other Italian polities are discussed in [Chapter 4](#), where a typology (rather than a chronology) of wars and diplomatic activities is attempted. [Chapter 5](#) breaks down the same processes to the level of individual elite families and factions, illustrating how Roman and non-Roman aristocrats came together in ways that shaped political and military events. The direct

aftermath of the unification is the subject of [Chapter 6](#). In it, high-impact models for the effect of the Roman conquest are challenged area by area, arguing for a much less disruptive picture of these consequences. After all these elements are in place, it becomes possible to present in [Chapter 7](#) a synthetic vision of how central and southern Italians collaborated to put together a territorial empire in the fourth and third centuries BCE.

Acknowledgments

A first draft of the entire book was written in 2000–2001 when, thanks to the kindness of Anthony Snodgrass and Henry Hurst, I presented a series of six lectures at the Faculty of Classics at Cambridge University. That transformative experience was supported by the British Arts and Humanities Research Board, by a Churchill College Fellowship, and by a UNC–Chapel Hill nurturance leave. The feedback received at the time was very important in the progress of the research. I kept working on the manuscript during sabbatical semesters granted by UNC–Chapel Hill and by the University of Michigan, while holding two Michigan Humanities Awards, as well as a Senior Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study. All these wonderful institutions are gratefully thanked for their support. Countless friends and colleagues have been very patient, generous in advice, and lenient in criticism, even when they disagreed with my interpretations. Mario Torelli and David Potter read the whole manuscript and provided invaluable help. The same goes for the anonymous readers of the manuscript. At least the names of Ed Bispham, Peter van Dommelen, Donald Haggis, Martin Millett, Marcello Mogetta, Chris Smith, Anthony Snodgrass, and Paolo Squatriti must be mentioned. Vincenzo Salmeri, Ed Bispham, Andrea Augenti, and Andy Goldman invited me to give talks about the book at Pisa, Oxford, Bologna, and Gonzaga, where the audiences offered precious feedback. Parrish Wright and Dan Diffendale helped me with figures and revisions; Dan is also the author of many of the drawings and photos; his art and critical eye have been invaluable. Fabio Colivicchi, J. Troy Samuels, Marcello Mogetta, Sheira Cohen, Mario Torelli, Jeremy Armstrong, Tony Kaufman, and Alex Hoer kindly shared unpublished information with me or gave me permission to reprint their materials. The late Jessica Kuper at Cambridge University Press kindly encouraged me to write this book, not suspecting that I would deliver it long after she was gone. Michael Sharp took over and helped me finish the project. Mark Scott copy-edited the text. Heartfelt thanks to all.

Many people around me had to put up with my working on what for two decades was ominously known simply as “the book.” This involved odd hours, physical and mental absences, cranky and despondent moods,

overexcited and repetitive descriptions of the main arguments. First and foremost, thanks for the patience to my children Giuliana Motta and Carlo Terrenato, then to Laura Motta, to my parents Marina Frontali and Luciano Terrenato, to my sister Francesca Terrenato and her partner Massimo Brizzi, to my friends Andrea Augenti, Marta Ciofi, Keri Bruggink, Roberto Gianani, Stefano Veneziano, and Claudio Parrinello. They all encouraged, coaxed, and supported me, made me laugh, read chapters, brought me snacks, and talked me off the ledge many times. I'm finally done guys!

Finally, and most importantly, this book is dedicated with humble gratitude to my old colleagues in the Department of Classics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Twenty years ago, they all welcomed me with warmth and kindness, giving me a stable home and a sense of professional self-worth. I want to remember especially George Houston, Jerzy Linderski, Cecil Wooten, Ken Sams, Mike Weiss, Kenneth Reckford, and Philip Stadter. At a time when no one else would, these fine folks took a big chance on an outsider disowned by his dissertation advisor, with a weird CV, unconventional research ideas, and a very wobbly understanding of US academia. Without their foresight, fairness, and unwavering support, I doubt that much would have become of me. I had promised them this very book for my tenure review, and they kept me even if I was nowhere near finishing it. I finally make good on that promise. Better late than never, I hope, and thanks again for everything.

Introduction

In the summer of 1897, Sigmund Freud came within fifty miles of Rome, but, for the second time, he could not bring himself to make the journey to the city as he had planned to do. In recounting the episode, he mused that he might have developed a “Roman neurosis,” which would inhibit him from entering the eternal city. A cosmopolitan Viennese like him could hardly have been daunted by the hastily expanded new capital of the Kingdom of Italy. Nor was it simply the small-minded, bigoted capital of Catholicism that repelled the tolerant Jew in him. Acutely dissecting his quirks as usual, Freud uncovered the root of his unexpected inhibition in the long shadow that ancient Rome was still casting on his consciousness. He saw the Roman Empire, together with the Christian Church that succeeded it, as relentless, sprawling, engulfing organizations that scared him and turned him away. In his mind, Rome was an oppressive, almighty force, like a terrible father. He recalled how, as a schoolboy, he had instinctively taken the doomed side of Hannibal. He claimed to have felt an instinctive kinship with the noble Semitic rebel. Now sitting outside Rome, he learnedly speculated that perhaps, just like Hannibal, he was destined to come within sight of the walls but never to clear them.¹

Freud was naturally inclined to treat his own perception of ancient Rome entirely as a reflection of his own idiosyncratic perspective on life and history, rather than being a product of the biases embedded in the scholarship of the time. But the textbooks that had shaped his views on Rome during his *Hochgymnasium* years arguably did not have a much stronger claim to a balanced assessment of the great empire than his admittedly irrational fantasies. Indeed, the vaunted objective and scientific picture of Roman imperialism that fellow German-speakers had painstakingly put together

¹ Simmons 2006. Many interpretations of Freud’s “Roman phobia” have been advanced. See an effective overview in Timpanaro 1984, which convincingly demonstrates that it was Rome as a historical icon (rather than as a symbol of oppressive fatherhood or longed-for motherhood) that played on Freud’s imagination. In 1901, however, Freud evidently got over himself and finally paid an extended visit to the city, which he repeated many times afterwards.

during Freud's lifetime was in great part the result of similarly visceral prejudices and deep-seated assumptions. Rome's terrifying historiographical presence was not simply a scholarly construction, nor was it, as all our attempts at narrating the past inevitably are, only a way of making sense of the present. By Freud's time, the story of Rome's ascent had been treated unlike any other comparable process. It still occupies a unique place in most intellectual traditions. The peculiar way in which Rome and especially its expansion have been construed for the last 2,000 years offers an unrivaled example of how self-sustaining traditions can acquire a life of their own.

A very long time before the Belle Époque, far less impressionable spirits than Freud had been utterly awed by the success of Rome. It is no exaggeration to say that few, if any, other historical processes have had a comparable evocative power. The rapid growth of large empires has always attracted the attention of posterity, but no rags-to-riches story has been as virally pervasive as that of Rome. The meteoric rise of Alexander or the vigorous feudal welding of Charlemagne may have had powerful afterlives, but in the end nothing could truly match the powerful fascination exerted by the image projected by Rome, with its collective rather than individual action, with its triumph of superior moral qualities and with the indelible impact it had on everything that followed. No scholarly discourse can ever abstract from dominant popular perceptions, and this is particularly true in the case of Rome's expansion. Precisely because of its cultural ubiquity, the narratives about Rome have tended to remain confined within a relatively narrow interpretative range. Many scholars are animated by a drive to subvert the frameworks of the previous generations, so that new ones can be advanced. And yet, there are some assumptions about the Roman conquest that are rooted in long-standing, universal perceptions of this process and that consequently have gone largely unchallenged so far. This may seem hard to believe when one considers the sheer mass of studies published on Rome and its reception over the last century or so, but it can perhaps be explained with reference to the peculiar place that the Roman past has had in the emergence of modern historical thinking. When the accepted view on some topic is as central to an entire cultural, philosophical, and educational system, it can be particularly difficult to call into question such deep foundations without appearing to flirt with nonsense. In a way, some fundamental ideas about the essential nature of the Roman conquest have yet to be evaluated and tested in full. They have been taken for granted because they were part of the narrative since the first time it was told, soon after the events transpired.

Reviewing here, once more, scholarly and popular views on Roman imperialism is not just an exercise in intellectual history. It can instead provide a valuable point of departure for innovative and unconventional new reconstructions. While the broader field of classical reception studies has flourished in recent decades, it has not always been the case that the results of those deconstructive attempts have had a direct, constructive impact on the production of different historical ideas about Rome.² Attempting to do precisely this in the specific case of the expansion of Rome may yield interesting results, especially when one considers how this part of the story has always figured prominently in scholarly and lay narratives alike, but has been the object of fewer reflexive studies than many others.³ At this point in the debate, retracing the afterlife of Roman imperialism may prove tangibly beneficial to a radical rethinking of this process. An entire book could barely do full justice to this rich and complex tradition,⁴ so the present overview will necessarily be incomplete and summary, and yet indispensable for the kind of comprehensive historical revision that is attempted here. It will also necessarily deal with views of the whole extent of Roman imperialism, rather than specifically with the early part of it. This is because most opinions about it, especially in the pre-modern period, referred to the entire process, from the siege of Veii to the invasions of Britain and Dacia. In those formulations, however, the fourth and third centuries BCE always played a very significant role, so that they are highly relevant to the period discussed in the following chapters.

Debating Roman Imperialism: The Early Days

It is obvious that the discourse on the beginning of Roman expansion was already under way at the time the events themselves were unfolding, but our earliest information comes from writers dating to an advanced stage of the process, like Polybius, or to its tail end, like Cicero, Livy, or Tacitus. The voices of the actual people who turned the small Roman state into a world power are all but lost to us and we have only those of the men, like Caesar or Trajan, who expanded an empire that already had no rivals. What little survives, like the epitaph of the general Scipio Barbatus (who died in 280

² Recent overviews in Hardwick and Stray 2008; Walde and Egger 2012.

³ Reference is made here to reflexivity theory, for which see among others Bourdieu 2001.

⁴ A book that has not yet been written. Important work in this sense is contained in Desideri 1991; Hingley 2001; Millar 2002. My own contribution in the latter volume, Terrenato 2001a, contains some of the basic ideas underpinning this chapter.

BCE), evokes for us a rhetoric based on military and civilian achievement.⁵ The key factor that made it possible is valor (*virtus*), an indispensable moral quality for the successful office-holder.⁶ The empire seems to be the natural consequence of the valorous, honorable, and legitimate actions undertaken by Roman elites, and its expansion must be a primary goal of its elites. Much of the later Roman discourse would present conflict and conquest as duty-bound responses to complex diplomatic entanglements, to outside threats or harassment or to outright aggression, without ever articulating a grand strategy.⁷ Greek observers like Polybius, on the other hand, could see an explicit imperialist agenda in the action of Rome, similar to those that competing Mediterranean expansionists had tried to advance. Polybius did not find what the Romans did abhorrent, however, and he agreed with them in attributing their success to the nature and structure of their society. Like a good Greek thinker, he paid particular attention to political abstractions and identified the secret ingredient as Rome's moderate constitution, rather than as any specific behavioral trait.⁸

Later on, Cicero and his contemporaries placed an even greater emphasis on moral qualities: for the great orator, the Romans only fought just wars, i.e. wars sparked by a provocation or by legitimate defensive concerns, and preceded by a ritually prescribed formal declaration. Indeed, scrupulous Roman piety would be essential to securing the divine favor without which no imperial success would be possible.⁹ For Cicero, another important ingredient is moderation in the treatment of defeated enemies, a magnanimous policy that inspires loyalty and further affirms the superiority of the conquerors. Instead, when provincial governors greedily exploit their subjects, the morality of empire is at risk.¹⁰ His idea that, at least in their pristine form, the Romans were intrinsically a cut above everyone else, and thus worthy of leadership, would go on to influence views of the conquest for centuries after his time.¹¹ What debate there might have been among Roman intellectuals in the heyday of the empire revolved mainly around the ethics of the conquest or the best administrative policies to

⁵ Badian 1968: 12–13; La Regina 1968.

⁶ McDonnell 2006; Balmaceda 2017.

⁷ These ideas will go on to constitute the foundation of modern theories of defensive imperialism, see pp. 18–22.

⁸ Musti 1978; Eckstein 1995; Millar 2002: 23–36; Baronowski 2011; also several of the papers in Derow, Smith, and Yarrow 2012.

⁹ Brunt 1978; Rose 1995.

¹⁰ Griffin 2008; the importance of Roman clemency is also emphasized in Vergil and Livy, Adler 2003.

¹¹ Steel 2001.

adopt in the conquered lands.¹² In the first few centuries CE, the Roman Empire was such a well-established, apparently indestructible institution that the causes that had brought it about tended to be taken for granted. Professional eulogizers like Aelius Aristides sang the praises of the Romans as “dominators by nature,”¹³ and even more critical thinkers connected with actual resistance movements, like Flavius Josephus, saw something inherently immanent and universal in the great empire, despite its occasional shortcomings.¹⁴

Taking a general look at the Roman perception of their own imperial success, it is clear that their narrative of the conquest, in hindsight, had the Romans as the only real characters and focused exclusively on their actions, their thought processes and their moral traits. Internal political and historiographical debates did take place, but they never questioned the axiom that what made such an unprecedented ascent possible was to be sought within Rome itself, in its ideal location, in the unique spiritual, military, or constitutional qualities of its polity.¹⁵ Rome’s pragmatism and adaptability were emphasized in some historical traditions and political speeches.¹⁶ Non-Romans, however defined, were typically treated briefly and mostly in terms of their friendliness or animosity towards Rome. They could be depicted as very aggressive, and in some cases as terrifying (as in the case of Hannibal or of the Gauls), but they did not shape the empire in any significant way. Even if their resistance and their indomitability might have been admired (for instance that of the Samnites), it did not affect the final outcome. Subtler strategies, from back-channel diplomacy and bribery to false compliance and foot-dragging did not figure much in the established narratives. The willingness of the Romans to incorporate non-Romans and, by granting them citizenship over time, turn them into Romans, was, on the other hand, sometimes highlighted as an important component, in which however the grantees were nothing more than grateful recipients of an enlightened policy.¹⁷ Similarly, broader political and economic circumstances and conjunctures that might have played a role in

¹² In Tacitus and elsewhere, the ethical implications of the conquest were considered, especially in fictional speeches given by enemy leaders, Clarke 2001; Adler 2011.

¹³ Desideri 1991; Fontanella 2008.

¹⁴ E.g., Schwartz 2001.

¹⁵ Nicolet 1997.

¹⁶ Humm 2007: 281–83; Armstrong 2016: 112–14.

¹⁷ In terms of contemporary treatments, most notable are a letter of the Macedonian king Philip V describing Roman citizenship policies and a speech of the emperor Claudius, both remarking on the long-standing policy of admitting conquered people into the empire; Griffin 1982; Kousser 2005; Kleijwegt 2009. For the issue in general, Woolf 2012: 218–32.

the expansion were consistently underplayed. To give just an example, little or no consideration was typically given to the fact that central Italy, unlike most other Mediterranean regions, was characterized by a particularly high density of states that had comparable complexity, social structure, and culture.

A mentality of this kind is not at all surprising, considering how all empires need the propaganda boost and the ideological reinforcement that is provided by the one-sided exaltation of their conquest in history, art, and literature. Assyrian or Aztec texts and reliefs do not show more concern for the larger context of the conquest they exalt.¹⁸ What is distinctive about Rome's case, however, is that the precipitously slanted narratives composed by the imperialists did not run their course and die with the empire that produced them, having exhausted their function. The hagiography of the Roman conquest instead became crystallized, constituting the foundation for most of the subsequent historiographic and popular discourse. Scholars simply accepted the conquerors' view of their deeds at face value. Even more, the memory of the Roman Empire went on to underpin ideologies of power in all the lands that had been part of it, from Britain to Syria, but even far beyond its reach, in places like northern Europe, Russia, or Ethiopia. As the name of Rome grew to become synonymous with past glory, many later empires (and aspiring ones) found in it a suitable, edifying role model to boost their self-confidence.

It was not only would-be emperors and other politicians that relied on a stock image of Rome. Intellectuals and thinkers as well tended to imagine the Roman period as a golden age, in cultural as much as in political terms. As Latin became the *lingua franca* of scholarship and international diplomacy, stylish writers like Cicero were adopted as required reading even at fairly elementary levels of education. As a result, their perspectives and assumptions about Rome's expansion were widely espoused and became pillars of medieval and Renaissance culture. The basic assumptions about their own conquest that Romans had were universally embraced and informed all later treatments of a historical process that was perceived as foundational for a wide range of states across Christendom and beyond. In this way, a dominant historical perspective was formed across different national and thematic discourses; it became so embedded that it was barely scratched by even the most radical recent deconstructive attempts. The past always tends to be a battleground of discordant tellings and retellings, but

¹⁸ Brumfiel 2001; Gutiérrez, Terrenato, and Otto 2015.

most narratives about the Roman expansion shared some fundamental frameworks.

A role in such a remarkable process of historical petrification was undoubtedly played by the onset of Christianity. Because originally the spread of the new religion had been centered in Rome and had benefited from the infrastructure of the empire, it was natural to see the latter as a divinely ordained vehicle for the expedient propagation of the faith. When, in the late fourth century CE, Christianity became the state religion, this appeared to confirm definitively the teleological interpretation of Rome's expansionistic parable. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–340) influentially theorized that the primary reason why the empire had emerged was to facilitate God's plan; he maintained that the emperor himself was divinely appointed and favored in his military triumphs.¹⁹ Eusebius was building on a concept that had already been established by Church Fathers such as Melito of Sardis in the second century CE.²⁰ In this new worldview, an omnipotent god had rendered the conquest unstoppable to accomplish his plan, independently of the surrounding circumstances. Thus the credit that Romans had assigned to their own piety and ritual scruple was neatly transferred to another divine source of historical causation. Overall, the belief that the expansion was not a hard thing to explain was further reinforced.

Despite his avowed devotion to and admiration for Cicero, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) notoriously defined Rome as an “imperious” city which had imposed its yoke and its language by force. The motives animating the pagan Roman commanders were lustful and were typical of the city of Man, and yet at the same time they unknowingly prepared the ground for the city of God. But, as the venerable imperial institution started to teeter in the West, Augustine was keen to point out that its function had been exhausted and that, like all earthly, prideful human endeavors, it was doomed to fall apart in the end. When the Western Roman Empire finally collapsed, he made sense of the traumatic development arguing that Rome's ascent had simply provided an infrastructure for the establishment of the Roman church and that it had evidently now fulfilled its true purpose.²¹ Augustine's harsh ethical and spiritual judgment on the empire stands at the head of a long, if at times subterranean, line of counternarratives that will present Rome as an amoral and insatiable war machine.

¹⁹ Davis 1957: 40–65; Barnes 1981; Canning 1996: 4–5.

²⁰ Kannaday 2004: 50.

²¹ Arbesmann 1954; Burns 1988: 103–16; Canning 1996: 39–43; Dyson 2005. The link between the Roman Empire and Christianity is still discussed by theologians today, e.g., Horsley 2002.

The political demise of Rome in the West, however, marked the beginning of its afterlife as a model, inspiration, predecessor and provider of legitimacy. If its function as a Christian vehicle had run its course, its stellar popularity as an ideological symbol had just begun. Early barbarian rulers made use of Roman imagery not only in their complex dealings with the Byzantines, but also locally as a way of making clear what their ambitions and pretensions were, especially whenever new kingdoms or dynasties were being created, or their boundaries were being expanded. In these frequent cases, Rome was referenced as the ultimate example of military prowess producing boundless expansion and an iron grip on the conquered lands. For instance, after his victories over the Visigoths, Frankish expansionist Clovis was acclaimed as “consul” and as “Augustus,” and clearly relied on the model of Rome for his own state-building efforts.²² Theoderic unashamedly proclaimed that the Roman emperors were his predecessors, while Bede endowed the kings of Kent with *imperium*.²³ Thus, right after the western empire disappeared, the states that had replaced it were quick to recruit its memory in support of their agendas, and, in so doing, they implicitly subscribed to the Romans’ own view of the conquest and laid the foundation of a stock image of their expansion that would prove extremely long-lived and hard to challenge in the following centuries.

By the time the Carolingian monarchy was established, the imagery and vocabulary drawn from the Roman past was firmly embedded in official propaganda. Charlemagne explicitly likened his empire-building to that of the Romans, and claimed to be in fact restoring their glory. His court propaganda, as expressed by the prominent scholar and poet Alcuin (c. 735–804; nicknamed Flaccus, like Horace), dubbed the king Augustus and his capital Aix-la-Chapelle the “second Rome.”²⁴ Charlemagne’s actions spoke even louder: he notoriously came to Rome to be crowned by the pope, producing just one of countless episodes in the complex dialectic between the memory of the pagan emperors and the reality of the Roman pontiffs; significantly, his seal announced in no uncertain terms that a “renewal of the Roman Empire” was under way.²⁵ The theme of the renovation of past glories pervaded the Christian West for centuries and also included biblical kingdoms and other golden ages whose return was hailed or expected. But the influence exerted

²² Hen 1993.

²³ Higham 1995; Arnold 2008.

²⁴ Folz 1953: 26–28. Another court poet, Modoin, nicknamed Naso, as Ovid, enthused that “Golden Rome renewed is once more reborn”; Burns 1988: 166.

²⁵ McKitterick 2006: 35–62. For the seals and other visual material, Garipzanov 2008. His grandson Charles the Bald had a similar seal, Canning 1996: 72.

by Rome remained unparalleled.²⁶ In the tenth century, the Saxon emperors Otto I and III assumed the appellative Augustus and claimed to rule the Romans as well as the Franks, once again proclaiming the rebirth of the old empire.²⁷ Elsewhere, the rulers of Britain also styled themselves emperors and Caesars, and so did the early kings of León in Spain.²⁸

It is not only Roman concepts of monarchy that were current in medieval Europe. The Latin term for state (*res publica*) was employed in Carolingian parlance, and many other times afterwards, for instance to describe the transitional period between the emperors Henry II and Conrad II in the early eleventh century.²⁹ John of Salisbury (c. 1120–1180) defined the *res publica* as the common good in classic Ciceronian terms, within the context of a treatise in which the ancient Romans were characterized as greedy imperialists (even if some great leaders like Camillus or Caesar were praised).³⁰ Anti-monarchical governments like those existing in some communes in Italy were keen to reference the republican period, illustrating the richness and flexibility of the uses to which the Roman past could be put. Pisa, which in the twelfth century was a rising power in the Mediterranean, capitalized on its foundation as a Roman colony over a thousand years before. It portrayed itself as a reincarnation of Rome in its best republican days, with consuls carrying out successful naval expeditions as far as the eastern shore of the Mediterranean.³¹ In Rome itself, a short-lived but very visible attempt to establish a republican commune was couched in terms of a re-founding of the original empire of the time of the conquest.³² One of the demagogues involved, Arnold of Brescia, inflamed the populace with the example of the “ancient Romans, who made the whole world theirs through ripe counsel of the Senate and the courage of their youth.”³³

In the centuries after the western Roman Empire disappeared and the eastern one, with some exceptions, was reduced to defending unsuccessfully its shrinking frontiers, Rome did not lose any of its iconic value in

²⁶ Golden Rome, Rome head of the world, capital of the universe are only some of the enthusiastic expressions of admiration; Folz 1953: 39–42; Noble 2013.

²⁷ Benson 1982; Muldoon 1999: 25–34; Limbach 2008; Keller 2015. Similar devices were adopted by Henry II and III, Conrad II, Canning 1996: 76–77.

²⁸ Drögereit 1952; Mackay and Benaboud 1984.

²⁹ Nelson 1994; Canning 1996: 65–67, 78.

³⁰ O'Daly 2012. John also significantly introduced for the first time the metaphor, commonplace from the Renaissance onwards, of the dwarves standing of the shoulders of giants to indicate the relationship between ancient achievements and modern ones.

³¹ Classen 1982; Wickham 1992. The Pisan consuls emphasized their emulation of great republican heroes like Cato or Atilius Regulus, Fisher 1966

³² Benson 1982; O'Daly 2012

³³ Davis 1974: 30–31

the eyes of emerging rulers and their propagandists. On the contrary, it was pressed into active political service to provide legitimacy and sanction to expansionist attempts of all kinds. Clearly, by evoking the great empire of the past, the sense was conveyed that the new political entities would have the same fortune, durability, and prosperity. Military success and territorial conquest were closely associated with the use of Roman vocabulary and images, and over time this created a canonical image of Rome as the archetype of empire-building. Thus, at a very early formative stage of what would become western European culture, and in the absence of proper historical scholarship, a specific interpretation of Rome's expansion was nailed in place by an imposed analogy with contemporary political events. In their attempts to characterize positively their own expansionism, these medieval comparatists implicitly reinforced the idea that the Roman conquest had been a military endeavor in which the braver and the more powerful had prevailed over lesser peoples.³⁴ Therefore, a basic interpretative framework of this kind had already been firmly in place for centuries when the first humanists began their scholarly retelling of the Roman conquest. The early modern narratives were developed around that fundamental template. While other periods of antiquity, like Periclean Athens, were essentially rediscovered by Renaissance scholars after a long silence, the discourse on Rome never ceased even in times of minimal literacy and book-writing. In this way, crucial elements of what later elite Romans thought of the conquest seeped directly into our historiographical tradition and are still with us now.

The Beginnings of Historical Research

The judgment on the greediness of the Roman state that was passed in the twelfth century by John of Salisbury, however qualified and motivated by contemporary considerations, represents one of the earliest scholarly interpretations of the ascent of the great empire after those of the classical and early Christian periods. It ushered in an era of specialist discourse conducted at a high intellectual level and, at least ostensibly, less directly connected with the political propaganda of its time. From this period onwards, 'pure' researchers created a true intellectual debate on ancient Rome. Speculating from their libraries and university chairs, they were in theory much freer to

³⁴ Occasionally this was even openly stated: in his world chronicle, the Carolingian historian Freculph of Lisieux had praised Roman valor in the republican period, Smalley 1971: 167.

challenge established views and received wisdoms on the basis of newly discovered texts and of alternative interpretations. When it came to Roman imperialism, however, the books written by professional scholars essentially stayed within the boundaries of the basic paradigm defined by court apologists and ideologues in previous centuries. The only significant interpretive variation concerned the morality of the Roman conquest, rather than its nature or its mechanisms. College-educated writers like John of Salisbury may have been free to shake their head at the voraciousness of the expanding Romans, but they rarely had a broader intellectual horizon than the one defined by their far less sophisticated predecessors in the early Middle Ages.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Aristotle-inspired philosophical school known as scholasticism had an important role in redefining and enriching the terms of the narratives about the Roman conquest. A close associate of Thomas Aquinas, Ptolemy of Lucca (c. 1236–1327), waxed ecstatically about the virtues of republican generals, and endowed them (in explicit contrast with the Augustinian vision) with a selfless patriotism that closely approached Christian charity.³⁵ Similar views were held by the Florentine Dominican Remigio de' Girolami (1235–1319), as well as by a scholastic of a stripe all his own, Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321). In the *Monarchia*, for instance, Dante clearly identifies as causes of Roman success military superiority, patriotism, political genius, and noble blood. Divine providence also had a hand in ensuring that the empire would perform its function as a vehicle for Christianity. Unlike his friend and mentor Brunetto Latini (or Ptolemy himself and other Tuscan humanists of his time), and despite his fervent admiration for the republican hero Cato the Younger, Dante was an uncompromising supporter of monarchy and of the Roman emperors, even if he deplored an excessive hunger for power.³⁶ As historical reflection and political thought began to part ways in this period, the triumphal rise of Rome's empire became a classic topic of research and commentary. Another great poet, humanist and Rome-lover of the time, Petrarch (1304–1374), put it simply and succinctly when he said that all history was “nothing but the praise of Rome.”³⁷ The German polymath abbot Engelbert of Admont (c. 1250–1331) ascribed Rome's successes to defensive

³⁵ Davis 1974; Millar 2002: 59–61; Blythe 2009: 179–86.

³⁶ Davis 1957; Davis 1987: 9–12; Blythe 2000.

³⁷ Mazzotta 1993: 121–24. Significantly, this basic statement was singled out by Foucault as one of the foundations of dominant western historical thought, which he defined as ‘Jupiterian’, Foucault 1997: 52; Petrarch also enthused about the naïve attempt of Cola di Rienzo to establish another classically inspired commune in mid-fourteenth century Rome, Collins 2002.

wars, voluntary surrenders and benign policies, which made its rule legitimate and beneficial.³⁸

With the approach of the Renaissance, learned Italian humanists progressively developed a proper school of historical thought endowed with considerable intellectual sophistication. While it was still rooted in the medieval literature, it would go on to be extremely influential on modern works, thanks also to the much wider availability of its published books. The Florentine Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) played a seminal role in founding a circle of scholars with specific interests in the history of politics.³⁹ Extolling, like Ptolemy, the Roman Republic, he interestingly reserved some praise for the small republican states of pre-Roman Italy, and especially for the Etruscan cities of his native Tuscany. This is a theme that would resurface here and there in the following centuries, providing a counterpoint to Romano-centric historiography.⁴⁰ Salutati's work set the stage for the debate that flourished in Florence during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It would reach its high mark with Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), and from there it would pervade modern western culture. Another significant figure was the Arretine Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370–1444), who was Salutati's disciple and succeeded him as chancellor of Florence. His book on the First Punic War drew heavily on Polybius, thus bringing the earliest interpreter of Roman imperialism back into the conversation, and intuiting that the true origins of the phenomenon resided in the great struggles of the Republic rather than in the deeds of Caesar or Trajan.⁴¹

Another significant strand in the relationship that Renaissance culture had with ancient Rome is represented by the emergence of antiquarianism. Straddling the scholarly, artistic, and commercial spheres, learned men would write admiringly about classical antiquity from a variety of points of view. While a lot of their attention was devoted to ancient sculpture and architecture, Roman customs and institutions were also celebrated, with empire-building often taking center stage. Flavio Biondo (1392–1463) significantly titled one of his works *De Roma triumphante*, in which two volumes are devoted to extolling the Roman military and its performance in the wars of expansion. Similar approaches can be found in other antiquarian writings, such as those of Rosinus or Sigonio.⁴² The contribution

³⁸ Osiander 2007: 296–311.

³⁹ Witt 1969; Witt 1983: 227–72.

⁴⁰ Cipriani 1980.

⁴¹ Ianziti 2012: 61–90. Bruni also wrote a biography of Cicero. Another republican enthusiast is Mario Salamonio, Millar 2002: 65–67.

⁴² Mazzocco 1985; Enenkel 2001.

that this tradition of Roman studies made to views of the conquest is particularly apparent in Lipsius' *Admiranda sive De magnitudine Romana*. This long treatise in Latin is nothing short of a paean to the Roman soldier, his dedication, bravery, and selflessness. As befitted an erudite humanist, Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) focused on the Latin concept of *virtus* as a key ingredient for the victorious mentality of the conquerors.⁴³ The Roman Empire was also used to exemplify the superiority of monarchy as a political system; indeed, expansionism was specifically applauded because it brought peoples together and homogenized them. The Catholic Lipsius had lived through the trauma of the Eighty Years' War and the break-up of his native Netherlands. He was an ardent supporter of the Hapsburg Empire, and he dreamed of a Europe centered again on imperial and papal Rome. Once more, the eternal city was not only worshiped, but its memory was marshaled to make a political statement (in this case by a professional scholar) that was relevant to the contemporary situation.

The concept that the secret ingredient of Rome's success was to be found in the republican period is definitively solidified in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, published posthumously in 1531 and destined to have an enormous influence on European historical and political thought. In this book, the strategies employed in Roman republican imperialism were explicitly dissected so that they could be reproduced by contemporary statesmen. For instance, Machiavelli singled out the use of massive military force in short bursts and the settling of colonists on conquered lands as effective Roman policies. Other ones include some that evidently resonated with the contemporary situation, such as the refusal to employ mercenaries and the yearly turnover of commanders.⁴⁴ The message was reiterated in other works, and especially in the *Prince*, one of the most widely read political science books of all time. Through the scholarship of Machiavelli and others, firm boundaries were set to the research on Roman imperialism for centuries to come. It became accepted that the main goal was to identify the strategies and motivations of the Romans to the exclusion of broader historical considerations. Precious elements of Roman mentality could only be gleaned and reconstructed from the ancient texts through a process of historical empathy. It is also definitively established that if one could only correctly determine what made the Romans great, the same strategies would ensure a comparable political triumph in any period and under any circumstances. Continuing the ideas propounded by many medieval apologists of empire,

⁴³ Desideri 1991: 599–600; Enenkel 2004.

⁴⁴ Coby 1999: 111–20; Millar 2002: 67–79; Hörnqvist 2004: 274–87.

in these works the Roman conquest was separated from ordinary history because it had been exceptional, but also, somewhat paradoxically, universally applicable. It was at once absolutely unique and a model for everyone else. By the same token, a tighter connection with contemporary political science and practice was created, one that would influence the professional study of Roman history down into the twentieth century.

A high-ranking politician that had both a theoretical and an applied interest in the Roman conquest was Francis Bacon (1561–1626). His essay on the *True greatnesse of the kingdomes and estates* made extensive use of the example of Rome to argue for Bacon's political ideas, especially with regard to Elizabethan England's own expansion. Building explicitly on Machiavelli's *Discourses*, Bacon advocated a citizen army as an essential ingredient of imperialism, when strengthened by a warlike disposition. He furthermore singled out the presence of a healthy yeomanry, the limitation of noble privilege, and the avoidance of the fine arts as key factors that make a nation strong. Rome would be a perfect model for all these desirable traits. Interestingly, he also discussed at some length Rome's generous policies towards conquered peoples, concluding cleverly that "it was not the Romans that spread upon the world, but it was the world that spread upon the Romans."⁴⁵ This is an important theme that will reappear many times in the scholarship on Roman imperialism and that will have an important part in this book.⁴⁶ It does not change the fact that, even for the inclusive Bacon, what the Romans did was the only historical phenomenon that was worthy of consideration and of imitation by those aspiring to "true greatnesse" in any time.

Needless to say, at this time British fascination (and identification) with Rome was only beginning. The Civil War and the Protectorate resulted in a renewed interest in republican constitutions and their effect on the power of states. Rome was conspicuously invoked both by royalists like Hobbes and by republicans like Harrington.⁴⁷ In the eighteenth century, republican Romans would increasingly loom large in high culture, elite behavior and political opinion.⁴⁸ The budding British Empire sought justification and ennoblement in the parallel with Rome's expansion and its wonderful civilizing effects, which included the creation of the province of Britannia itself.⁴⁹ Among the intellectuals, a good example of the growing interest in

⁴⁵ White 1958; Faulkner 1993: 183–200. For the broader discourse in England, Cox Jensen 2012.

⁴⁶ Peltonen 1992.

⁴⁷ Harrington went as far as envisioning a direct application of the Roman constitution to the British Isles, Millar 2002: 80–99.

⁴⁸ Ayres 1997.

⁴⁹ Hingley 2008: 157–236.

Roman imperialism as a political precedent can be found in the works of David Hume (1711–1776). An avid reader of Machiavelli, Hume seemed almost compelled to deal with the case of Rome to express his views about early modern England. He admired the civic discipline and the sense of duty of republican Romans, clearly indicating their value as role models and as supporting evidence for his proposed theory of political realism.⁵⁰ In Hume, however, we see one of the earliest appearances of the long-lived opinion that the Roman conquest had gone too far. In his estimation, the Romans had put together an impossibly large empire and therefore caused the collapse of that very republican system that had provided them with a competitive advantage in the first place. A perspective of this kind offered a justification for the contemporary British colonial focus, which was on trade and not yet on territorial expansion. It also explained the eventual dissolution of the Roman Empire as well as its creation. Hume's views in this sense had a direct influence on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and would have significant echoes in Romantic scholarship.⁵¹

Across the Channel, Montesquieu (1689–1755) had been developing a detailed and comprehensive analysis of Roman imperialism in his 1734 work, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur decadence*. As in Hume, the full cycle of conquest and collapse appeared as a single, long-term phenomenon that could only be understood in its entirety. In many ways, Montesquieu systematized and epitomized, in much greater detail than most of his predecessors, much of the early modern reflection on Rome. His work has been hailed as a turning point in the self-definition of historiography as a discipline.⁵² Building on what was by then a long tradition, he explained the Roman military superiority with the alternation of the consuls, the constant fielding of their armies and the relentless dedication to war. Montesquieu's Romans are animated by a "principle of war" that can only result in destruction or triumph. Then, by draining resources from the conquered peoples and slowly encroaching on the new lands with colonies and confiscations, the Romans would cunningly absorb entire economies without much destruction.⁵³ Agreeing with Hume, Montesquieu pinned the blame for the collapse on excessive expansion, which led to the demise of the republican system.⁵⁴ While setting an important standard for an interpretative analysis of history, Montesquieu

⁵⁰ Whelan 2004.

⁵¹ Aderhold 2002: 164–71.

⁵² Senarclens 2003.

⁵³ Frézouls 1983; Myers 1995.

⁵⁴ Aron 1966: 127–28.

also had a transparent political agenda that he thought the Roman example could best advance.⁵⁵ This approach was even more evident in his contemporary Gabriel Mably (1709–1785), author of a *Parallèle des Romains et des Français*, in which he spurs his countrymen to emulate Rome's glory.⁵⁶

Mably's more famous younger brother, the philosopher Étienne de Condillac (1714–1780), on the other hand, authored an interesting indictment of Roman expansion. He agreed that they had a military and organizational edge over their weak opponents, but his overall historical judgment was very negative, primarily on ethical grounds. For Condillac, the Romans were an aggressive and despotic people, and should not be the object of admiration or emulation.⁵⁷ His views were contained in a handbook of history that he wrote for his pupil, the young prince of Parma, and may have resonated with similar views held in eighteenth-century Italy, which was then fragmented into a number of small states like the Duchy where Condillac taught. Well before the nationalist surge of the Romantic period, the Roman conquest was negatively characterized by some Italian scholars as an extermination of non-Roman identities and the imposition of an iron-fisted central administration. For instance, a Neapolitan reader of Condillac, Giuseppe Galanti (1743–1806), deplored the demise of local Italian cultures, like that of the Samnites, at the hands of the Roman expansion. For this alternative school of thought, before Rome's expansion Italy had enjoyed a golden age during which civilized and less aggressive communities coexisted in peace.⁵⁸ Other Italian writers of the time, like Algarotti or Denina, were on the same wavelength. The mature fruit of this intellectual lineage is represented by Giuseppe Micali (1768–1844). His *L'Italia avanti il dominio dei Romani* is entirely devoted to pre-Roman Italy, and takes an antithetical stance to the exaltation of the classical period.⁵⁹ Celebrating the richness of local culture and traditions (a powerful and long-lived element throughout early modern Italian culture), he deplored the homogenization brought about by Rome in terms that echo the 'nativist' discourses in Tacitus and anticipate some current postcolonial formulations.⁶⁰

The growing critique of Roman imperialism reached its pinnacle in Johann Herder's new philosophy of history. Influenced by Montesquieu's disillusionment at the lasting value of the Roman Empire, Herder

⁵⁵ Rahe 2005.

⁵⁶ Wright 1997.

⁵⁷ Desideri 1991: 604–05; Paganini 2007.

⁵⁸ Marcone 2005.

⁵⁹ Micali 1810; discussion in Whitfield 1979; Gabba 1994; Colombini 1998.

⁶⁰ Mascioli 1942.

(1744–1803) painted the conquest in bleak colors, as an endless succession of brutal acts of aggression, deceptions, and annihilations.⁶¹ Again, the disappearance of local traditional cultures at the hands of Roman coercive centralization was denounced strenuously, this time from the perspective of a proto-Romantic fascination with popular traditions and folklore. In terms of Herder's general view of human history, the Romans were starkly singled out as a paradigm of state brutality, perfectly illustrating the equation between "conquerors" and "man-hunters."⁶² That such an inhuman system would eventually collapse was only natural, in fact it was history's way of righting itself despite the perverse instincts of men. Herder's indictment of Rome would occasionally resonate throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth century, for instance in Benjamin Constant's dismissal of liberty in the ancient world.⁶³ Clearly reacting against the French revolutionary and Napoleonic use of the analogy with Rome, Constant (1767–1830) condemned ancient imperialism, but was however prepared to admit that the Romans at least had had a civilizing effect in western Europe.⁶⁴

Thus, at the dawn of the age of professional ancient history, there had been many centuries of lively discourse on Roman imperialism. Most writers shared an enthusiastic admiration of its marvelous achievements, crediting it with a positive, even providential effect on human history. Ever since Tacitus and Augustine, however, there had been a flipside, a minority opinion that criticized some aspects of the conquest, such as its overreach, or even condemned it in its entirety. Almost always, at any rate, political points that were relevant to the contemporary situation were made through the reference to Rome, which consistently "played the role of *miroir du siècle*: it was a rhetorical tool, and the fuzziness of its content made it flexible enough to serve different causes."⁶⁵ The ubiquity of this simile across time and space in western culture needs to be underscored. It was as if no statement about contemporary politics, history or culture could be made without reference to Rome. For both schools of thought, at any rate, there were a number of basic axioms about Rome's empire-building that were held as self-evident by virtually every one of the writers reviewed so far. There was no doubt that the Romans had initiated the conquest, that they had, at least for a while, dominated militarily over all other peoples, placing them in a subordinate position, and had spread their own culture

⁶¹ Desideri 1991: 607–09; Bohm 2009.

⁶² Berlin 1976: 158–59.

⁶³ Jenson 2001: 56–86.

⁶⁴ Desideri 1991: 609–10.

⁶⁵ Russo 1999: 336.

everywhere. Most of the difference in scholarly opinion was limited to the ethical and historical judgment to be reached on the matter. So, when the first German ancient historians appeared on the scene, despite their claims to be strictly adhering to a critical reading of the original sources, they in fact found already solidly in place a millennium and a half of highly influential intellectual tradition.

The Advent of Scientific Historiography

A turning point in the trajectory taken by the discourse on the Roman conquest was represented by the emergence of ancient history as a specialty in the course of the nineteenth century. What had been until then the shared domain of philosophers, social scientists, pamphlet writers, and politicians was now claimed by a remarkably well-defined group of professional classical philologists, ancient historians, and Roman lawyers. Broad-ranging intellectuals, from Goethe and Flaubert to Freud and Arendt, continued to make occasional or specific references to Rome's imperialism, usually to make a larger point about human history, economy, or mind. But it became generally accepted (perhaps more so than for the study of other historical periods) that only scholars trained in Latin and Greek language and antiquities would have an authoritative voice in the debate. Such professionalization of classical studies has been hailed by some as progress towards more impartial and unbiased narratives, which would be exclusively based on a philological reading of the ancient literary texts.⁶⁶ It can be provocatively argued instead that the influence of contemporary world views on the new generation of ancient historians was more powerful and pervasive than ever before, if perhaps subtler and harder to recognize. The analogy between Rome and contemporary European states very firmly underpinned the interpretation of the Roman conquest. The new orthodoxy led to the creation of textbook explanations sanctioned by specialists, to the exclusion of the exploration of alternative hypotheses.

The publication in the 1810s of Niebuhr's *Römische Geschichte* is typically considered to have ushered in a new era in ancient studies, indeed as the very birth of a modern scientific Roman history. His work, however, was not unrelated to the debate that had been developing in late eighteenth-century France and Germany.⁶⁷ Significantly, Barthold Niebuhr

⁶⁶ Niebuhr 1811–12; discussion in Christ 1972; Momigliano 1982.

⁶⁷ The whole intellectual milieu is well reconstructed now in Holzer 2013.

(1776–1831) was also a politician and an ardent Prussian nationalist who made no secret of the links he saw between Rome and his motherland, especially in terms of the agrarian situation. Dissenting from Herder's harsh judgment, Niebuhr, like Machiavelli before him, found solace from the bitter realities of the German situation after the defeat of Jena in the contemplation of the "great nation" that was ancient Rome.⁶⁸ Clearly, his intention was to dissect Roman culture, and especially its civic and kinship institutions, to discover an organizational secret that could explain their superior capacity for national cohesion and empire-building.⁶⁹ The impact of Niebuhr's vision of Roman history on the discipline would be profound. As the first professor of ancient history at the newly founded University of Berlin, a post destined to be globally prominent in classical studies, he would come to be considered a founding father for the rich tradition of studies that came after him.

The construction of a distinctly Prussian view of Roman imperialism reached its maturity with Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903). Written in the aftermath of the 1848 troubles, Mommsen's *Römische Geschichte* was even more explicit than Niebuhr's in identifying Rome, rather than Greece, as the only role model that modern Germans should aspire to emulate. Just as Latin Rome had unified Italy, so Prussian Berlin would unify Germany, even at the price of bloodshed and misery. In Mommsen, empire-building and nation-building were essentially the same process, the only difference being that imperial expansion could easily go too far. Echoing Hume's contention, Mommsen deplored that the conquest had not stopped at the Italian peninsula, arguing that Rome's decadence had begun as soon as it had transcended its natural role as the unifier of Italians. The real reason for the decline, however, was not in the practical difficulties of administering a far-flung dominion but rather in the multi-ethnic nature necessarily displayed by large empires.⁷⁰ Espousing the enthusiasm that Herder and other Romantics had for the concept of *Volk*, Mommsen maintained that only culturally homogeneous states could offer stability over the long term. Consequently, he tended to downplay the heterogeneity of ethnic groups in Italy, which he preferred to see as one people deep down, as a nation waiting to happen, like the Germany of his own time. In the same breath, however, he applauded the Roman conquest of Gaul as a positive step for

⁶⁸ Yavetz 1976.

⁶⁹ Martínez-Pinna 2005; Mantena 2010: 62–64.

⁷⁰ Mommsen 1854–6; discussion in Linderski 1984; Freeman 1997.

the civilization of Europe, laying the foundations for the colonialist views that developed in the late nineteenth century.⁷¹

Another problem that Mommsen clearly struggled with, as someone who had been a liberal in his youth, had to do with the ethics of the conquest. If Augustine was right and greed had been the prime mover for expansion, then how could nation-building be morally justified? A philologist through and through, he found a solution in what the Latin writers themselves had to say about the process. Glossing over Polybius' diagnosis of the phenomenon, Mommsen preferred to stick to the letter of Livy's narrative and Cicero's rhetoric, according to which the senate declared war almost exclusively in response to provocation or threat. Rome, in other words, had no imperialist agenda; the expansion, at least initially, simply resulted from Rome's stellar success in dealing with its enemies and aggressors in the course of just wars. The senate would be a fragmented and factionalized body that could not implement a clear expansionist policy, but rather reacted to emergencies and concerns as they presented themselves. These concepts became the fundamental tenets of the theory of defensive imperialism, which was destined to enjoy a very large following in the specialist and as well as in the popular literature.⁷²

Even after the advent of professional ancient historians, there continued to be eminent thinkers, mostly philosophers, that exerted an influence upon the specialist debate on Rome. Albert Schweigler (1819–1857), for instance, had written extensively on early Rome and on its agrarian and military structures; echoes of his ideas can be found in the works of many classicists.⁷³ Certainly, however, no German nineteenth-century thinker would have a deeper and longer-lasting impact on the discourse on Roman imperialism than Karl Marx (1818–1883), despite his devoting only very limited attention to classical antiquity. In his works, the Graeco-Roman world tended to remain in the background of his analyses, ready to be mentioned in support of a more general point but never the main focus of his research. After all, at seventeen, Marx had written a school essay in Latin discussing the reign of Augustus, a circumstance that should remind us of the central position that Rome had always retained in European education.⁷⁴ As an adult political philosopher, in his *Grundrisse*, he combined the observations made about land ownership in early Rome with his theory of economic growth and instability to provide a powerful new explanation

⁷¹ Frézouls 1983.

⁷² Duplá Ansuategui 2005.

⁷³ Yavetz 1976; Martínez-Pinna 2005.

⁷⁴ Baldwin 1988.

for Roman wars and expansion. His emphasis on the role played by war-fueled slavery in Rome's economic development laid the groundwork for establishing close links between the two phenomena.⁷⁵ But it was his overall materialist interpretation of historical causation that in the long run had the longest-lasting effect on the debate, giving a whole other dimension and meaning to the lustful imperialist greed indicted by Augustine.

Another important component within the non-specialist debate in the later nineteenth century is represented by those who wrote about contemporary European colonialism, drawing explicit comparisons with Rome's policies in its provinces.⁷⁶ Especially in those nations, like France and England, that were quickly acquiring vast and far-flung dominions in Africa and Asia, it appeared natural to some observers to liken these dramatic new developments to the glorious expansion of the Roman Empire. In Britain, good examples are provided by the politicians and imperial administrators who wrote comparative works. The peer and jurist James Bryce (1838–1922) published *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India*, detailing what he saw as similarities and differences between the two institutions. In both cases, Bryce argued, it was external dangers that drove the conquest forward, thus furnishing both empires with the ethical justification that is built into theories of defensive imperialism.⁷⁷ Other British colonial administrators who wrote similar books in the early twentieth century include Charles Lucas and Lord Cromer (1841–1917).⁷⁸ The latter was adamant, like Lipsius before him, that empires like the Roman and the British constituted the only possible barrier against anarchy and disruption. In all this discourse, in any case, a major concern resided with the cultural implications of the conquest, which reputedly resulted in a wholesale acculturation and civilization of the peoples conquered by Rome. This was in line with the political rhetoric of the time, which justified European colonialism by the moral imperative to civilize the local populations.

Contemporary colonial concerns also percolated in the specialist scholarship on the Roman Empire. For Francis Haverfield (1860–1919), who had been a collaborator of Mommsen, this was encapsulated in the concept of Romanization. For the first time, Haverfield systematically brought

⁷⁵ Marx 1939; In general, on the relevance of Marx's *Grundrisse* on the ancient Mediterranean, Carandini 1979. The connection was made explicit in later Marxist writing, for instance in Lenin's *Imperialism*; Barone 1985: 19.

⁷⁶ The question was picked up by Brunt (1965) during the Cold war; the debate is still active today, e.g., Smil 2010; Parchami 2009; a review in Vasunia 2011.

⁷⁷ Bryce 1914; the list of Victorians who engaged in the comparison with Rome is long, Vasunia 2005: 238–324; Hingley 2008.

⁷⁸ Majeed 1999.

archeological evidence to bear on the question, reaching the conclusion that even in a remote province like Britain the cultural influence of Rome had been extremely pervasive. He too likened this epoch-making phenomenon for western Europe to what western Europe itself was doing in Africa and Asia at the time, openly providing historical depth and context for British colonialist policies.⁷⁹ On the continent, another scholar of Roman imperialism who was integrating archeological materials, this time in the Aegean, was Maurice Holleaux (1861–1932), a product of the École Normale, where Fustel de Coulanges and Durkheim taught. In his well-structured analysis of Rome's policies in the East, Holleaux was eager to argue that they were completely justified given the provocations and threats in the region.⁸⁰ The portrait gallery of early twentieth-century defensive imperialists could not omit the American Tenney Frank (1876–1939). In his 1914 *Roman Imperialism*, he placed the search for prime movers of the expansion squarely at the center of his inquiry. His conclusion was, once again, that Rome had been drawn into conflict and expansion by external circumstances, not unlike the United States had been in Cuba.⁸¹ Like many before and after him, Frank too reckoned that the Roman conquest had gone too far and too fast, a flaw that had eventually led to its collapse. From this, he drew a clear admonition for the foreign politics of the United States, seesawing between the doctrines of isolationism and manifest destiny.⁸²

Perhaps significantly, in countries where colonial expansion was not such a burning issue, the discourse on Rome's imperialism took a more nuanced form. For instance in Italy, Gaetano De Sanctis (1870–1957) did consider the Roman unification of the peninsula a positive development, but deplored what followed it. He clearly had the Italian Risorgimento in the back of his mind when he described in his *Storia dei Romani* the process of merging together Italian peoples. Taking the critique of excessive imperialism to a new level, he attributed it exclusively to greed and aggressiveness. In particular, he wrote a harsh indictment of the Roman conquest of the Greek world, which he blamed for the tragic demise of the sublime culture of those lands.⁸³ Not content with reaffirming the Humean notion that in wanton expansion resided the beginning of the end for the

⁷⁹ Haverfield 1905; discussion in Hingley 2000; Freeman 2007.

⁸⁰ Holleaux 1921; Walbank 1963; Linderski 1984.

⁸¹ Frank 1914; discussion in Linderski 1984; Adler 2008.

⁸² Here there may have been an influence of the Italian philosopher G. Ferrero, who had lectured extensively in Theodore Roosevelt-era America and had published a book titled *Ancient Rome and modern America*; Polverini 1989.

⁸³ De Sanctis 1907; discussion in Linderski 1984; Walbank 2002: 310–21.

empire, De Sanctis went further and essentially interpreted the whole parable of Rome as a process fraught with cruel violence and ending in disaster. Like many accusers of Rome before him, however, he had to concede that the conquest of the West had had a civilizing effect. In his teleological view, the empire's main contribution was to have paved the way for Christianity, but also to have offered a foil that the Church should have transcended, but largely failed to do so.⁸⁴ De Sanctis' old Russian friend and colleague, Mikhail Rostovtzeff (1870–1952), had a similarly negative view of the Roman Empire, which he saw as a disruptive machine undermining and thriving on the troubles of other states in the East. In him, one finds more than the simple Augustinian moral reprobation of imperialism, but rather the notion that it was a chaotic and entropic mechanism that took on a life of its own, spinning out of control almost as soon as it began.⁸⁵ Things in Italy changed completely during the Fascist dictatorship, when Rome's expansion became a central aspect of the regime's propaganda. The tone of scholars was more guarded, as usual, but in historians like Plinio Fraccaro the exaltation of the civilizing impact of the conquest is evident.⁸⁶

Thus, some early twentieth-century views of Roman imperialism introduced the idea that there was something perverse and uncontrollable in the expansionist policies implemented by the senate. Probably influenced by the militaristic excesses and the frontline horrors of the First World War, they tended to explain Rome's constant campaigning with an urge that was inherent in their social or political structure. The theory of aggressive imperialism, which was destined to become very popular in the Cold War era, emerged in this context. As for economic imperialism, a non-specialist had an important role in its further definition at this time. The economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) only devoted a handful of influential pages to the Roman Empire, but they succinctly conceptualized the mechanism that would drive Roman expansion. Dismissing any claims that Rome was really threatened or provoked to conflict, Schumpeter argued that pre-modern states run by a landed aristocracy needed constant war to reinforce their status, negotiate internal politics, and feed their slave-based productive structure.⁸⁷ At the same time, he saw war as a sort of self-feeding disease that eventually led the whole structure to reach an unsustainable size and complexity. As in De Sanctis, the Roman elites ultimately failed to serve their own cause well because of the forces at play within their own

⁸⁴ Gabba 1971.

⁸⁵ Frézouls 1983.

⁸⁶ Cagnetta 1979; Stone 1999; Arthurs 2012.

⁸⁷ Harris 1979: 259–61; Frézouls 1983; Eckstein 2000.

society. After the Second World War, the scholarship would elaborate and substantiate the positions expressed in the previous century, giving rise to one of the most intensely and hotly discussed historiographic exchanges on pre-modern events.

The Debate in the Last Few Decades

Discussing adequately the last sixty years of debate on Roman imperialism is, in some ways, even more daunting than reviewing the two thousand years that preceded them. Especially since the 1960s, perhaps not independently of the climate created by decolonization and by the Cold War, there has been an exponential increase in the amount and richness of the specialist scholarship. The classic arguments have been fleshed out in well-informed, monograph-length treatments, and new perspectives have been opened up, mainly in connection initially with the diffusion of materialist theories on the Continent, and then with the rise of postmodernism. The discourse has become much more closely integrated across scholarly traditions and national boundaries, thanks to conferences, edited volumes, and other forms of academic dialogue.⁸⁸ At the same time, a certain amount of entrenchment and crystallization has been perceptible, as opposing schools of thought faced off repeatedly and tended to develop standard critiques of each other's positions.

A considerable amount of astute, self-reflexive work has also been carried out, assessing, reviewing, and critiquing the recent and current scholarship.⁸⁹ Most of those treatments have espoused in some form the well-established triple division into defensive, aggressive, and economic explanations for Roman imperialism. The existence of this literature fortunately makes a brief discussion of these basic views sufficient for the purposes of this book. The idea that the Romans were primarily reacting to threats, fears, and challenges is as old as the conquest itself, and it is also the first one to have been subject to a proper scholarly argumentation at the hands of early nineteenth-century German historians. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was restated and developed by historians like Frank Walbank (1909–2008) and especially Ernst Badian (1925–2011), who essentially argued that the senate simply lacked the tools to plan a grand strategy

⁸⁸ E.g., Garnsey and Whittaker 1978; Harris 1984; Hermon 1991.

⁸⁹ Among the many examples, Woolf 1993; Rich 1995; Warrior 1996: 13–22; Champion 2004: 1–15; Erskine 2010: 33–49; Thorne 2013; Woolf 2016.

as well as the incentive to seek expansion in an active way. The assembly instead simply responded, somewhat inconsistently depending on the situation, to outside stimuli.⁹⁰ For Badian, expansionism is a universal human trait and cannot be used to explain Rome's particular behavior, while in any case the cultural constraint of only fighting just wars would keep the urge in check. Others, like Erich Gruen, go further in recognizing a distinct greed for booty, glory, and revenue to Roman elites, but do not see a direct connection with military policies actually implemented on the ground.⁹¹ Particularly when considering the eastern Mediterranean, Gruen does not deny that there were large amounts of resources that were drained towards Rome as a result of the conquest, but he does not see any clear evidence that this process played a determinant role in shaping the deliberations of the senate.

The theory of aggressive imperialism too is as old as Polybius and was propounded by many pre-modern writers, from Augustine to Herder. It was however marginalized after Mommsen's influential formulations, with Schumpeter and De Sanctis as the most obvious exceptions, and only truly revived in the 1970s, thanks primarily to the work of William Harris, whose 1979 *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome* constituted a true turning point in the debate.⁹² In this influential book, the machinery of the Roman political system is brought to the fore as the real prime mover of the process: since military glory was essential to electoral success, elite Romans were irresistibly drawn to constant new wars and expeditions. Loot also was politically very useful, so the whole system was geared to breed more imperialism and naturally select aggressive leaders, since they were more likely to be reelected.⁹³ It should be noted that in this version of the aggressive theory there is still little or no deliberation in Rome about the conquest. Senators and consuls needed victories for their careers, but they would have had no overall strategy of domination across the Mediterranean. In this sense, as is the case with the defensive approach of Gruen, these explanations are significantly compatible with a primitivist view of the ancient economy, one in which the Romans lacked the cultural and mental framework required to initiate their expansion for a more generalized economic advantage. In

⁹⁰ Walbank 1963; Badian 1968. Critical review of defensive imperialism in Harris 1979: 163–74.

⁹¹ Gruen 1984a; Gruen 1984b.

⁹² This was also building on a renewed interest for the Polybian interpretation of Roman imperialism, e.g., Musti 1978; Gabba 1993.

⁹³ Harris 1979. It should be noted, however, that in an earlier paper Harris had left much more space for the existence of an explicit economic agenda behind the conquest; Harris 1971a. He comes back to this now; Harris 2016: 37–43.

much the same vein proceed some studies that look specifically at Rome's expansion in the East or in the West. Indeed, aggressive theories appear to be particularly favored when dealing with far-flung conquests that happened after the defeat of Carthage, as if these were more difficult to explain with the presence of threats to Rome.⁹⁴ After all, Mommsen himself had considered expansion beyond Italy as unnecessary, therefore less justifiable, in a way suggesting that, in his mind, fear of aggression was a more fitting explanation for the early part of the conquest.

In 1968, Badian's reaffirmation of defensive imperialism was expressly aimed at correcting the errors of "a generation nourished on Marx." It should be noted in passing that Marxism, although politically and culturally on the rise in the broader world, had at that point not been applied to the scholarship on Roman imperialism in any systematic way.⁹⁵ It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that, especially on the Continent, a sustained effort was made at interpreting the historical phenomenon in stricter materialist terms. In this new analytical effort, looting, taxation, and confiscations were considered to have had only a minor impact on the economics of the conquest. Building for the first time on the results of a wealth of new archeological fieldwork that had been accumulating for decades, these scholars posited the existence of a *de facto* causal connection between the expansion of Rome and the economic development of the late Republic and early Empire. Thus, even if this was hardly ever articulated by any contemporary observer, in this school of thought the real goals of the conquest were the expansion of the market economy, the exploitation of natural resources, and the establishment of a slave mode of production.⁹⁶ This approach (in line with the Marxian contention that the material forces at work in shaping history are often invisible and actively obfuscated) sidestepped entirely the question of senatorial decision-making in favor of a basic *cui bono* approach: since the classes that benefited the most from the conquest were the commercial and industrial ones, they must ultimately have driven the process forward in some way that is hard for us to

⁹⁴ Derow 1979; Richardson 1986; Loreto 2007. A work that has been particularly influential outside classical circles is Luttwak 1976.

⁹⁵ Badian 1968: 18. There is no reference explaining who Badian had in mind when he wrote this. The paramount Marxist ancient historian in 1960s England (where Badian was based at the time) was of course Moses Finley, who however empathically denied any economic motivation for the conquest (e.g., Finley 1973: 21) in terms that Badian would have most likely subscribed to. Discussion now in Adler 2008; Harris 2013.

⁹⁶ The argument is developed in full in Giardina and Schiavone 1981; see also Tchernia 1986; Carandini 1988; Love 1991; Andreau 2003. Their idea was building on what had already been outlined by earlier scholars, Rostovtzeff 1926; Salvioli 1929. It is present also in T. Frank's works.

detect.⁹⁷ Needless to say, this edifice relied on a modernist view of the ancient economy, which saw imperial Rome as the closest pre-modern approximation of capitalism.⁹⁸ Connected with this approach is a whole set of studies that has been seeking to apply postcolonial theory to the Roman Empire. Although often primarily concerned with the cultural changes prompted by the conquest, these reconstructions operate under the assumption that economic exploitation of the provinces was at the root of the expansion process.⁹⁹

For a while therefore, the arguments about Roman imperialism have tended to revolve around the three fundamental interpretations with only a few variants, consistently repeating the same formulations and critiques of opposing views. Progressively in recent decades, however, there have been attempts to revitalize the debate by pushing it outside the established discursive framework, exploring new avenues and asking new questions of the existing data. For a long time, the issue that received the lion's share of attention was to determine the impulse that had driven the Romans on the path of war and conquest. Other equally important problems were overshadowed, such as what had made the expansion so successful and long-lived, whether there were differences in the phenomenon across time and space, or what were the direct consequences of it, to name just a few. In other words, the spotlight has remained fixed on the Romans, on their decision-making process, on their economy, on their worldview or on their fears and emotions. During this period, however, there have been some original contributions that have attempted to combine the different models and emphasized the heterogeneity of the expansion.¹⁰⁰ Yet others have instead deepened the analysis of the thought process leading the Romans to push forward their boundaries. A long essay by Paul Veyne has tried to reconstruct the mentality behind the drive for universal conquest, building on structuralist approaches.¹⁰¹ And it should be remembered that an alleged

⁹⁷ A clear exposition of this causal approach is in Yavetz 1991. Critique in Woolf 1992; Dmitriev 2009.

⁹⁸ An idea fervently opposed by most of the English-speaking scholarship at the time, but which now seem to have been gaining ground; Scheidel, Morris and Saller 2007.

⁹⁹ A concept introduced by Bénabou 1976 and successively developed, especially in the context of the western and southern provinces in Webster 1994; Webster 2001; Mattingly 2011. For Italy, van Dommelen 1998.

¹⁰⁰ E.g., North 1981, which criticizes Harris' assumption that senatorial action was not constrained by a host of other factors, or Rich 1995, which wonders whether monocausal explanations can ever account for the problem in its entirety.

¹⁰¹ Veyne 1975. Interestingly, this was originally a paper for a seminar led by that same Aron, who had himself remarked on the stability introduced by the conquest (Aron 1962: 221–22), in replying to the moral indignation of Weil that had likened Rome to Hitler's Germany; Weil 1940; also, Desideri 1991: 595–98; Nevin 1991: 136–37, 325.

innate Roman warrior ethos figures prominently in Harris and other aggressive imperialism proponents too.¹⁰² A role has also been assigned to physical violence, to its omnipresence and to the attempts to regulate and monopolize it as the Roman state was emerging.¹⁰³ One can almost perceive a tendency to psychoanalyze the Romans and identify the recondite forces that may explain their extraordinary behavior.¹⁰⁴

Another recent trend has involved extending our gaze to look at the broader context of the Roman conquest. For instance, in analyzing the interplay between second-century BCE Mediterranean powers, Arthur Eckstein has taken into account the actions of other contemporary empires, emphasizing the complex dynamics of the entire political system.¹⁰⁵ Arguing against any particular bellicosity of the Romans, he has suggested instead that the overall political situation in the region could have been conducive to the emergence of a superpower. A number of recent studies of a similar ilk have also downplayed the role of war and have looked instead at the contributions made by diplomatic exchanges, alliances, friendship, and other forms of interaction between states, often considering the ethical limitations that placed boundaries to the actions of the expanding states.¹⁰⁶ The constraints posed by the environment, by the human geography, and by the demography of the Mediterranean have also been brought to bear on the process, providing valuable insights.¹⁰⁷ In a similar way, other material factors, such as population pressures, economic changes, or even climatic ones have been considered as potential causes that do not originate within Rome itself.¹⁰⁸

Much less attention has been paid, on the whole, to the reasons behind the stellar success of Rome's expansion. Even if it was an important question for many pre-modern interpreters, starting with Polybius, determining why the Romans had prevailed has not been a primary goal of the scholarship and has often been left to global comparative syntheses and popular history books.¹⁰⁹ It is perhaps revealing that most scholars have seemed to take it

¹⁰² Harris 1979: 9–53; critique in Raaflaub 1996.

¹⁰³ Eich and Eich 2005.

¹⁰⁴ For instance, in some works Harris seems inclined to assign a role to another Roman emotion instead of fear, namely anger; Harris 2001. The effects of the trauma of defeats and raids are considered in Raaflaub 1996, and recently it has hypothesized that Roman leaders may have suffered from a form of PTSD; Eich 2015: ch. 22.

¹⁰⁵ Eckstein 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Auliard 2006a; Caire and Pittia 2006; Eilers 2009; Burton 2011; Lomas 2012.

¹⁰⁷ Horden and Purcell 2000; Rosenstein 2004.

¹⁰⁸ For population pressure, e.g., Oakley 1995b; Raaflaub 1996: 292–93; Scheidel 2009b. For climate, Crumley and Marquardt 1987, see also Finné, et al. 2011.

¹⁰⁹ E.g., Turchin 2006; Scheidel 2009a; overview in Vasunia 2011.

for granted that, whatever their motivations, once the Romans sprang into action, they naturally prevailed over their opponents, implicitly accepting views that were already current in the times of Machiavelli or Montesquieu. The military superiority described by Polybius has often been invoked as the primary factor that gave an edge to the expanding empire, especially in the countless works devoted to the Roman army.¹¹⁰ Another Polybian favorite, Rome's political system, has sometimes been brought into the picture, for instance remarking upon its inclusiveness, manifested in the ability to seamlessly incorporate conquered peoples within the imperial amalgam.¹¹¹ When considering expansion into western and central Europe, it is often pointed out that the Romans possessed superior technology and, more generally, a higher level of cultural complexity. In that context, the related question of why the expansion stopped when it did has also occasionally cropped up, especially in books by later prehistorians, who have tended to conclude that the push petered out when it ran out of compatible societies to engulf. For them, the conquest could never work in those areas of temperate Europe where social complexity had not progressed enough.¹¹² While a bit simplistic, these reflections on Roman imperialism based on its absence, so to speak, have had the undeniable merit of considering the agency of non-Roman polities as a significant variable in the causation of the process, something that has hardly ever happened in the rest of the literature.

In concluding such a broad-ranging review, it should be evident what the main contention advanced here is. Despite two millennia of enormously rich discourse on Roman imperialism, there are still significant areas that remain underexplored. The most conspicuous is surely the broader context in which the conquest took place. From the very beginning, Roman actions have received a completely disproportionate share of the attention, and their motivations and strategies have been endlessly dissected, without a truly alternative perspective. In this sense, it makes little difference that, at times, from Augustine to the postcolonialists, there have been sharp condemnations of those actions, since these otherwise subversive voices have not changed our substantive understanding of the process, but just our moral judgment of it. Only very rarely have the role and the behavior of non-Romans been considered to be a determinant political factor. While the textual material is skewed in favor of the Romans, archeology and

¹¹⁰ Goldsworthy 2003; Southern 2006; Phang 2008; but also in Harris 2016: 43–44.

¹¹¹ E.g., Cornell 1995; Nicolet 1997.

¹¹² E.g., Cunliffe 1988; Randsborg 1991. Discussion in Woolf 1993.

epigraphy have made contributions that enable us to begin rebalancing our perspective. Relying on local evidence, it is possible to determine who actually benefited from the conquest. Approaches of this kind can free the discourse from the philological tyranny of staying within the limits of what the sources say happened, allowing for the possibility that forces invisible to ancient writers, but not necessarily to us, may have been at play. Our gaze can finally be averted from the specific event of the Roman military campaign as told by Livy to the conjunctures and the long-term trends that bookended the conquest. Reflecting holistically may reveal preexisting conditions that shaped the outcome of expansion, as well as distant consequences that illuminate otherwise shadowy mechanisms that must have had a role.¹¹³

Furthermore, building on critiques of monocausal interpretations, as well as on attempts at breaking down the process across space and time, it should be possible to deploy a more context-sensitive reading of the Roman conquest that makes space for a variety of models which account for different one-to-one relationships between Rome and the communities that were being incorporated by them. Another important dimension, seldom explored in the literature, is the variability of behaviors and responses across different sociological groups. The Romans and the politics and ethnic groups they encountered have often been treated as if they were single-minded modern warring national states. Instead, the presence of factions and social hierarchies made the phenomenon even more complicated, sometimes leading to the rise of interest groups that cut across civic and other boundaries. In a related area, new theories that break down the Hobbesian view of states as monopolists on power and violence can also open up new and unexpected insights into the real forces at work in the process. The remainder of this book ambitiously attempts to combine all these perspectives into an experimental new reading of the early phases of the Roman conquest, turning some assumptions on their head and challenging a received wisdom that has been with us since the time of Cicero.

¹¹³ Perceptive overview in [Stek 2014](#).

2 | The Long-Term Context of Roman Expansion: Central Italian Society and Politics in the Early First Millennium BCE

Introduction

One of the patterns that stands out more evidently, once the historiography on Roman imperialism is comprehensively reviewed, is the limited amount of interest that the broader context of the expansion has attracted, chronologically as well as geographically. In particular, what had happened in the centuries preceding the conquest has not typically been deemed relevant to discussions of that great historical transition.¹ Etruscan kings and Carthaginian colonies may have their own intrinsic, albeit certainly not comparable, attraction, but they have been considered in narratives of the expansion when Roman armies approached them, thus positioning them firmly at the receiving end of the political action. This is not surprising, given the constant emphasis placed on Roman motivations, which was often underpinned by the assumption that the Roman superiority could easily explain their success. Ultimately, this made it appear useless to piece together from hopelessly fragmentary materials what had happened before the Romans arrived on each separate geographic scene. Rome's unique achievement acquired such a universal paradigmatic status that, in the dominant perception, it drifted irretrievably away from the temporal and geographic circumstances that in all likelihood had shaped it. As a result, the convention emerged that the real narrative of the conquest would not need to concern itself with what had happened before the early fourth century BCE, when Veii was captured and Rome was sacked by the Gauls. At any rate, Roman history prior to that moment was (and still is) largely considered fraught with uncertainties because of the poor quality of the available sources. For the rest of early Italy, there is much less information, and, in any case, it was never considered a significant variable in most explanations of the conquest.² Local histories were briefly introduced as a lead-in to the account of each stage of the conquest and were never

¹ And, similarly, what was happening elsewhere in the Mediterranean during the conquest; see [Chapter 3](#).

² E.g., Salmon 1982; David 1994.

assembled together in organic diachronic narratives or in a general regional synthesis, of which Rome would be only a facet.³ All this has only begun to change in some recent scholarship, which attempts to convey a more balanced and further-reaching analysis of the process.⁴

The profound interconnectedness of Mediterranean developments has been emphasized many times since the work of Ferdinand Braudel,⁵ and yet in the case of Rome's ascent there has been a struggle to integrate it fully in the general flow of historiography. It should, instead, make good sense that the unification of Italy was only an episode in a complex, long-term global dynamic that affected an entire world. There are, for instance, macroscopic cultural and socioeconomic trends that take place on the scale of millennia and of thousands of kilometers, such as the spread of statehood, urbanism, coinage, or literacy, to name just a few of the most apparent. They began before the Roman conquest, continued during it, as well as after it, and were still in progress long after the Roman Empire collapsed. Such preexisting trends and structures in the Mediterranean must have conditioned and directed the expansion, and yet they have only occasionally and partially been brought to bear on the issue.⁶ Not surprisingly, the only focus of attention in this sense has been early Rome, primarily thanks to the textual material that has survived, with all its problems, in the historical sources. It should be noted in passing that in some thematic areas, most notably in the study of ancient religion, there has been a remarkable tendency to approach the whole span of the phenomenon organically.⁷ But in most other ways, there has always been a profound disconnect between the conquest and the phase that preceded it. This sharp boundary was traditionally blamed on the Gaulish sack of Rome in 390 BCE, during which most documents would have been destroyed, creating great uncertainty concerning the first few centuries of Rome's history. In this way, conveniently, the expansion would have begun just when better records become available to us, in contrast with the earlier period, which appears as a twilight zone

³ Among the exceptions, Torelli 1981b; Pallottino 1985; Bourdin 2012; Farney and Bradley 2018.

⁴ Works have appeared that take the Iron Age as their starting point, but they typically do not cover the entire conquest of Italy; Cornell 1995; Lomas 2018.

⁵ Braudel 1949. For the classical period, the obvious work is Horden and Purcell 2000, which however does not attempt a reconsideration of the Roman expansion. See also van Dommelen and Knapp 2010; Broodbank 2013.

⁶ An interesting attempt and a broad perspective for a later period, which however has had little or no impact on the classical scholarship, is Randsborg 1991.

⁷ Archaic religion is perhaps the aspect of early Rome that is considered more knowable and that has the greatest impact on later periods, at least since Dumézil 1966; among the countless recent examples are Beard, North, and Price 1998; Rüpke 2001. An intriguing study of early mentality is MacMullen 2011.

shrouded in mystery and about which nothing could ever be positively established.⁸ To aggressive imperialists, such a sharp separation presented the added attraction of diffusing the stark paradox that Rome did not significantly expand for the first three or four hundred years of its existence, despite the congenital propensity for war and conquest that they typically attributed to the Romans. More generally, scholars seem to find comfort in averting their gaze from the only major war utterly lost by the Romans and focusing instead on the unbroken streak of victories that followed it. More adventurous ancient historians did try to make some sense of the problematic earlier period, like explorers probing a mysterious continent, but they would naturally tend to develop a separate debate from the mainstream treatment of the conquest, so that there were rarely ever attempts at tracking connections and continuities that spanned the two periods.⁹

Aside from the exceptional case of Rome, the research on early first-millennium BCE Italy has been typically carried out by archeologists, who have created and pursued their own specialist discourse, more connected with the later prehistory of the peninsula than with ancient history. This is because for these areas (Greek colonies in southern Italy excepted) there is virtually no textual material, reliable or otherwise. Two steps removed (one disciplinary and one chronological) from the conquest, the study of pre-Roman Italy has so far played only a marginal role in most modern analyses of Roman imperialism. Despite these traditional divides, the pace of new archeological discoveries has increased so much in the last few years that some elements have begun to percolate slowly through to the historical literature.¹⁰ And yet it seems hard to deny that the full potential of a long-term, multidisciplinary, geographically inclusive approach has not yet been exploited in full. Integrating archeological and textual information, placing Rome and the rest of Italy (as well as the Mediterranean) on the same plane, expanding our gaze to include at least the origins of those peer states that were the protagonists of the conquest may well open the road for a reconstruction of the overall process that is significantly different from those that have been predominant since Polybius and Cicero. Thanks to a holistic perspective of this kind, long-term patterns and recurrences may become visible across time and space, leading to a fruitful deconstruction of the axiom that Rome's expansion was unique and solely driven by Rome,

⁸ Key in this school of thought, often referred to as hypercritical, are Alföldi 1963; Poucet 1985. An ample and perceptive review is in Grandazzi 1991.

⁹ Only in some recent work is noticeable a more comprehensive and diachronic approach, Cornell 1995; Lomas 2018, although it is arguable that much remains to be done in this area.

¹⁰ A classic synthesis was in Pallottino 1985. For the Etruscans in particular, Torelli 1981b.

and providing a rebalancing counterpoint to thousands of years of unidirectional narratives.

A General Review of Urbanization

Given the mass of new archeological data and the complex interpretive problems of the literary sources, it may seem like a desperate endeavor to synthesize the four or five hundred years that preceded the Roman conquest in central Italy. Despite several comprehensive book-length works that have appeared in recent years,¹¹ there is a lot that is still uncollected and only partially digested. In view of that, the only viable option for the purposes of this book is to focus on those thematic aspects that potentially have the greater relevance for the later conquest. Such are, for instance, the sociopolitical developments associated with the emergence of aristocracies and urban centers, the migration of individuals and groups, or the cultural connections across regions and ethnic boundaries that facilitated the spread of ideas, artifacts, and patterns of elite behavior. It has been convincingly argued that it is in these areas of institutional history, mentality, and culture that the best chances for solid reconstructions and inferences reside.¹² Attempts at creating a narrative of specific events and actions, on the other hand, are doomed to indemonstrability, if not outright failure. The textual data for foundations, reigns, wars, or laws essentially exists only for Rome and is indeed, to a very large extent, hopelessly confused and contradictory. A blow-by-blow account of what happened can only ever be extremely tentative and completely one-sided, and in any case it would not serve the purposes of a long-term, compendious investigation of how the Roman Empire came into being and thrived. It is true that a significant amount of good-quality archeological evidence is available for most of Italy by now, but it is not intrinsically suited to prove that individual events did (or did not) happen; rather, it can lend itself, when adequately handled, to the kind of broad structural treatments that can clarify important causal connections and deep interactions between the forces involved. It should also be clearly stated, however, that the choice of themes and the way in which they are treated is unashamedly in service of the overall argument about Roman imperialism propounded here and cannot presume to be an

¹¹ E.g., Smith 1996, which is a laudable example of an historian taking seriously the archeological sources; Forsythe 2005.

¹² Momigliano 1963; see also Wiseman 2008.

attempt at covering systematically the many threads that connect the first with the second half of the first millennium BCE in central Italy.

Historiography of the long-term must contend with the temptation to reach further and further back in time in the search for initial triggers, prime movers, and ultimate causes. In the case of urban central Italy, it is fairly customary at this point to take the beginning of the Iron Age as the starting point to describe the evolution of social and political complexity.¹³ In this sense, the only preexisting element that is perhaps worth mentioning is the likely emergence of inherited rank already at some advanced stage of the Bronze Age, toward the end of the second half of the second millennium BCE. A sufficient archeological record seems to exist, mostly from burial sites, but also from some village settlements and bronze hoards, supporting the notion of some sort of lineage groups who manifested their status through the conspicuous display of metal, exotic, or otherwise prestigious items in their group tombs and above average houses.¹⁴ The precise nature of these groups is of course hard to determine, even if there are articulated hypotheses in some of the scholarly literature.¹⁵ Settlement data show that most of these elites resided in villages, often on a hilltop of about a hectare in size, suggesting a population of perhaps one or two hundred.¹⁶ A certain proportion of these Late Bronze Age settlements appear to continue their life at least until the early Iron Age, and indeed quite a few of the later cities, Rome included, have produced traces of continuous Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age occupation beginning at least in the twelfth–eleventh century BCE.¹⁷

With the beginning of the Iron Age, a small subset of the existing villages showed clear signs of a radical reorganization that is generally accepted to be in connection with the process of urbanization and state formation. Together with the emergence of social stratification (whenever it may have happened), this is the other great transformation that will have a profound effect on the beginning of the conquest, five hundred years later, because it will be primarily small, city-based states originating in this period that will

¹³ E.g., Lomas 2018.

¹⁴ Bartoloni 1989: 81–2; Di Gennaro 1999.

¹⁵ For an hypothesis of Bronze Age social development, Peroni 1996: 1–43; also Cardarelli 2011.

¹⁶ Bietti Sestieri 2005; Di Gennaro and Barbaro 2008; Bietti Sestieri 2010.

¹⁷ Materials dating to the Middle and Late Bronze Age were found out of context and, most notably in the case of Rome, used to conjecture an occupation sequence reaching back to the Middle Bronze Age, e.g., in Carandini 1997, which is however impossible to prove without stratified deposits. New C14 dates now in Brock and Terrenato 2016.

be aggregated in the budding empire.¹⁸ While the few surviving narratives about this period mostly ramble about the foundation of Rome and the movements of largely fictitious ethnic groups, the archeological data, primarily from field surveys, show that from the ninth century there was an extremely sharp and rapid increase in the size of those existing villages that would later become cities.¹⁹ Surface materials were found scattered across areas ranging from 50 to 150 hectares, typically very clearly clustered in discrete concentrations (see [Figure 2.1](#)).²⁰ The locations of these expanding settlements are either volcanic plateaus or broad hillsides that have a measure of natural defensibility, and are also beginning to be protected by artificial fortifications.²¹ All the known cases are concentrated on the western side of central Italy and extend up to about 50 km inland. Those in southern Etruria, to the north of Rome, tend to be larger than those to the south, in Latium, which are however more tightly clustered together. There are virtually no excavated remains from these centers, aside from a few hut floors in Rome, Tarquinia, and, more recently, Gabii.²² At Tarquinia, excavations revealed a sequence of cultic activities that could have its beginning in the early Iron Age.²³ We therefore cannot tell how well structured, nucleated, fortified, or monumentalized were those settlements, but their absolute distinctiveness from the rest of the human habitation of the region in this period cannot in any way be doubted. This is further supported by the burial record, which is one of the best known for Iron Age Europe. Graveyards are known from almost all of these sites, and some of them have yielded hundreds of rich tombs dating to the tenth, ninth, and early eighth centuries BCE, suggesting that in each of these emerging centers a number of elite groups were firmly established.²⁴ There are other elements from this dataset that may be relevant for later developments: for instance,

¹⁸ While the concept of city-state has gained broad currency in the literature on premodern states, its precise definition is still controversial; Yoffee 1997; Hansen 1998; Hansen 2000. It will therefore be avoided in this book.

¹⁹ It should be noted that for the Iron Age of central Italy there are significant chronological differences between traditional dates and radiocarbon ones; for convenience's sake, traditional dates will be used here; Bettelli 1997; Bartoloni and Delpino 2005.

²⁰ Pacciarelli 1991; Rendeli 1993; Pacciarelli 2001; Pacciarelli 2017. It should be noted that, given the methodology of the surveys in question, it cannot be ruled out that at least part of the observed patchiness may be due to surface visibility issues. It is however unlikely for this recurring pattern to be entirely an artifact produced by differential surface coverage.

²¹ Fontaine and Helas 2016a.

²² Linington 1982; Mura Sommella 2003; Cazzella 2001; Cazzella, et al. 2007; Evans, et al. forthcoming; Mogetta and Cohen forthcoming; overview in Karlsson 2017.

²³ Bonghi Jovino, Chiaramonte Treré and Bedini 1997; Bonghi Jovino 2006.

²⁴ Among the many examples, Close-Brooks 1965; Acanfora 1976; Bartoloni 1989; Bietti Sestieri 1992a; Iaia 1999.

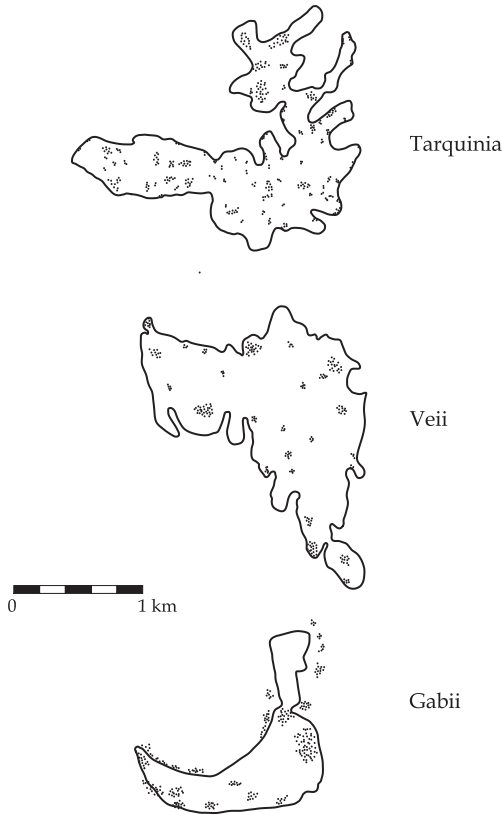


Figure 2.1 Maps of the urban sites of Veii, Tarquinia, and Gabii in the eighth century BCE. The shaded areas correspond to scatters of surface artifacts datable to this period. This evidence is based on systematic field surveys conducted by various scholars at different times (Pacciarelli 2017; illustration by D. Diffendale).

the ubiquitous presence of weapons, shields, helmets, and armor in the graves is a strong indicator that a warrior ethos was part of central Italian mentalities everywhere from the beginning (see [Figure 2.2](#)).²⁵ Also significant are the broad similarities in prestige material culture across the whole region, regardless of ethnic boundaries. Finally, the tombs sometimes appear clustered in groups with common traits, which could correspond to lineages of some kind.²⁶ Smaller sets of comparable tombs are also found far from the emerging centers, and they must indicate that there were aristocratic groups that were still located in the countryside, in those fortified villages that continued the traditional settlement style of the Bronze Age.²⁷

²⁵ Stary 1981; Martinelli 2004.

²⁶ Bietti Sestieri 1992b; Pacciarelli 2010.

²⁷ Iaia and Pacciarelli 2012.



Figure 2.2 Bronze weapons recovered from Tomb AA1, at the Quattro Fontanili graveyard near Veii. It dates to the mid-eighth century BCE and has been interpreted by some as a royal burial (Boitani 2004). The grave goods also included a bronze ash urn, jewelry, an Egyptian ivory scarab, horse bits, parts of a chariot, and a set of ceramic vessels (image reprinted from Pacciarelli, Marco 2017. “Society, 10th cent.-730 BCE,” in A. Naso (ed.), *Etruscology*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 759–78, courtesy of De Gruyter).

A transformation of great import appears to have happened toward the end of the ninth century, when adult burials stop being placed inside a perimeter that surrounds the entire settlement. From that point onward, graves will be relegated to the periphery of the emerging city, outside the line later marked by the city walls. This is particularly noticeable in Rome itself, where graveyards had previously existed on the slopes of the hills. From the eighth century onward, however, they are confined to the Esquiline, on the eastern side of the city, where a major burial ground will continue to exist down to historical times.²⁸ Given the predominant and long-maintained taboo against burying adults inside settled areas, this may be an indication that the notional boundaries of these centers were expanding, a process that would presuppose some measure of central authority, as well as some sort of conceptualization of a much larger urban space. For the rest, things do not change significantly in the course of the eighth century, despite claims that have been made about watershed events in the urbanization process in this period, mostly on the basis of later written sources.²⁹ The only changes that are visible in the archeological record are the appearance, in addition to hut floors similar to those already attested, of rudimentary fortifications, which do not necessarily form a complete circuit, and the establishment of a few more cult-places, whose precise nature cannot however be determined.³⁰ For both of these new features, it cannot yet be proven with certainty that they were created and belonged to the entire community, as in the case of the burial exclusion zone.

A much more marked change is perceivable in the seventh century. Many more (and more imposing) fortification circuits and cult-places are attested in a number of centers, and there seem to be indications of incontrovertibly public spaces, at least in Rome and Caere.³¹ In most cases, religious activity is inferred on the strength of deposits containing votive materials, although in some cases structural remains have been interpreted as belonging to cult buildings.³² In both sacred and domestic architecture there was a progressive transition over the course of this century from huts to rectangular houses with ashlar bases and fired roof tiles.³³ The change in the burial record is even more dramatic, as the amount of resources employed in

²⁸ Gjerstad 1953, with the chronological revision of Bettelli 1997.

²⁹ E.g., Carafa 1996; Carandini 2006.

³⁰ Brocato, Ricci, and Terrenato 1995; Smith 1996: 78; Fontaine and Helas 2016b.

³¹ Ammerman 1996; Carafa 1998; Cristofani 2003.

³² E.g., Rathje 2006; overview in Potts 2015: 13–30.

³³ A process that will only be completed in the sixth century, Brandt and Karlsson 2001.

elite burials increases exponentially. So-called princely tombs appear near major cities; they contain spectacular Orientalizing grave goods, including imported exotic gold, silver, ivory, and glass objects.³⁴ Tomb architecture is also revolutionized with the introduction, especially in Etruria, of large mounds covering extensive chamber tombs, cut in the bedrock or built in blocks and slabs, and often containing complex carvings and painted surfaces.³⁵ Each of the larger mounds can contain more than one multi-chamber tomb and be used for several dozen distinct adult burials over the course of a century or two, presumably by the same kin group.

By the sixth century, the process of urban formation is undoubtedly complete, especially after about 550 BCE. The most spectacular traces are offered by wood and wattle-and-daub temples on massive stone podiums and city walls in well-dressed ashlar, which are found at virtually all the emerging cities. These temples clearly result from major communal endeavors; they are typically positioned in the middle of the city and at the end of processional roads. The new cult-places represent a focus of aggregation for the entire settlement, while the fortifications materialize a boundary of the urbanized space that in most cases had been defined centuries before. Other significant new traits include the occasional orthogonal blocks, paved roads, open-air public spaces, shops, private houses with courtyards, richly molded and painted tile roofs (for temples and elite house alike), cisterns, drains, and public inscriptions on stone.³⁶ Majestic rural residences are also occasionally attested, as well as isolated smaller farms, extending the settlement typology well beyond the network of traditional Iron Age villages.³⁷ At this time, the burial evidence presents the first major local differentiation between the cities of Latium, where grave goods and tomb decoration decline very sharply, and the rest of central Italy, which continues to be characterized by prestigious burials.³⁸ Even there, the investment in each tomb is smaller than in the previous century and there are tangible signs of a standardization of elite funerary behaviors aimed at curbing the most extravagant displays.

In this way, cities in western central Italy came into being over a long period of about four hundred years and they radically and irrevocably changed the

³⁴ Fulminante 2003; Riva 2010b.

³⁵ Prayon 2000; Naso 2017b.

³⁶ For Rome and environs, Cristofani 1990; Cifani 2008; Della Fina 2010; Lulof and Smith 2017. For Etruria, Prayon 1975; Colonna 1986; Donati 2000; overview in Potts 2015: 31–61.

³⁷ Terrenato 2001b; Cifani 2002; Carandini, D'Alessio, and Di Giuseppe 2006.

³⁸ Colonna 1977; Bartoloni 2010.

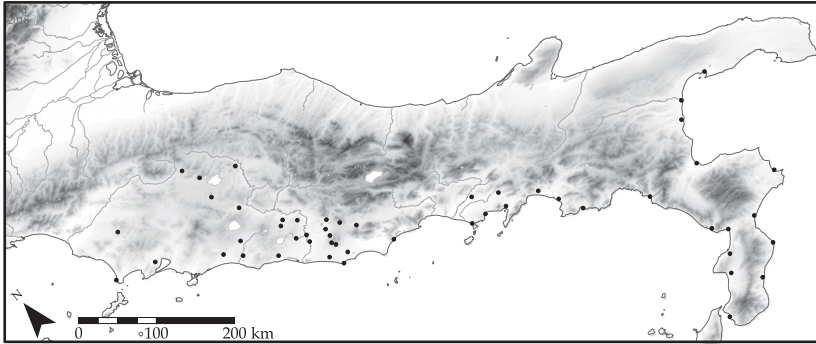


Figure 2.3 Map showing the diffusion of urban centers in peninsular Italy in the sixth century BCE. Regardless of their nature or origin, taken together they represent the result of a massive wave of urbanization that impacts the western and southern shores (illustration by D. Diffendale).

human landscape of the region. Similar processes were of course under way in comparable forms in a number of other neighboring areas, while along the eastern seaboard and in western Asia cities had existed long before. What can be defined as the first wave of central Mediterranean urbanism is distributed widely but irregularly, with an evident predilection for coastal locations with good harbors. Cities however are far from ubiquitous, since there are long stretches of the shoreline that are completely devoid of them. The obvious concentrations are in peninsular Greece and in western central and southern Italy, where they often have their nearest neighbor in the 15–30 km range. There is a more or less uninterrupted chain of them the length of the long Italian coastline, extending from Taranto to Populonia and ending abruptly at both ends (see [Figure 2.3](#)). Within this general pattern, western central Italy is highly distinctive because in it cities appear, with comparable densities, much further inland than anywhere else, up to 100 km from the sea. The only comparable area is the Peloponnese, where however most cities are within 30 km of the coast. Thus, the central Italian urban system is much more tightly clustered and inland-reaching than any other, with Rome located slightly to the southwest of its true geographic center.

While it is essential to frame the origins of Rome in its broader cultural and geographic context, it is also important to look closely at the ways in which this particular urban center, destined to play such an eminent role in later developments, may have differed from its peers at an early stage. In geographic terms, Rome is the only city in the region to be located right on

the banks of a major river, which created a high-energy natural environment.³⁹ No other site had even vaguely analogous issues with flooding and erosion of its lowlands, nor a similarly uneven morphology, with relatively small high hills separated by deep and wide valleys.⁴⁰ As a result, no comparable evidence of massive human impact to ameliorate and reclaim large portions of the settlement along the river banks and between the hills has been seen at any other urban center. The presence of the river, and especially of a harbor and a ford by the Tiberine Island, constituted a significant strategic advantage in terms of intersecting communication lines that did not exist elsewhere.⁴¹ Early Rome was also considerably larger in surface than any other emerging city in the region. Its sixth-century walls probably encompassed an area of 250–280 hectares, while most Etruscan cities at the time were below 150 hectares and Latin ones below 80. A contributing factor must lie in the unsuitability for occupation of large tracts of flood lands and ravines that had to be included within the walls for strategic reasons. However, once these badlands had been reclaimed, the walled surface of the resulting city ended up being very large. It has also been remarked that the size of Rome's main archaic temple on the Capitoline hill was much bigger than any other known cult-place in the region.⁴² Finally, Rome was arguably straddling a significant cultural boundary, as well as a geographic one, since the Tiber more or less neatly separated non-Indo-European Etruscan speakers to the north from Latin and other Indo-European speakers to the south. While ethnic differences in this period are difficult to assess and should not, in any case, be exaggerated, it is possible that a particularly hybrid and inclusive self-perception may have characterized the Romans from the beginning.⁴³ These peculiarities may well have had some kind of role in later developments, but they should not obscure the fact that for the first four or five hundred years of its history, Rome was in most respects one of a large group of peer cities in western central Italy that had similar evolution, magnitude, institutions, and mentality.⁴⁴

³⁹ Corazza and Lombardi 1995; Heiken, Funicello, and De Rita 2005. The closest parallel in terms of setting, Fiesole in northern Etruria, is about 5 km from the river Arno but is on a high hilltop overlooking the valley.

⁴⁰ Ammerman, Miller, and Ramsay 2000; Aldrete 2007.

⁴¹ Brock 2016; Marra, et al. 2018.

⁴² Rendeli 1989. The reconstruction and the chronology of the temple at Rome are rather controversial, but it seems established that by the late sixth century there was a massive podium on the Capitoline hill, Ammerman and Terrenato 1996; Cifani 2008. The main cults in many of the other cities are, however, unknown so it cannot be ruled out that there were peers of the temple in Rome.

⁴³ Full argument in Dench 2005.

⁴⁴ Gildenhard 2003.

Defining the Social Actors: Elites and Others

In reconstructing the formation of the states in central Italy, it is important not to deal exclusively in political abstractions, thus losing sight of the actual players involved in the process. Much of the relevant scholarship so far has tended to downplay the importance of the social structures that were in place when the cities begun to emerge. For instance, it was often assumed that the lineages that clearly existed from the Late Bronze Age had become irrelevant once the urban governments had taken control of the fully fledged new polity. And yet, an argument could be made that certain traits of Italian social structures continued to play an important role for many centuries after states were firmly established.⁴⁵ It is therefore essential, in our effort to provide a broader context for Rome's expansion, to take into account the way in which the actual agents in the process were aggregated when the changes begun. This is not an easy task, considering the known uncertainties inherent in the written sources (which in any case exist only for Rome) and the difficulties of inferring social organization purely on the basis of archeological indicators. And yet a literature has developed in the last few decades, which has recruited a vast array of evidence, from legal sources to the history of religion, in an attempt to reconstruct some fundamental elements of the social organization prevailing in central Italy.

Prompted by frequent textual references, in historical times, to the *gens*, a kind of Roman extended lineage group, scholars since Vico, Niebuhr, and Morgan have theorized that it was a fundamental element of central Italian society from the very beginning of its political development. Indeed, in evolutionary frameworks such as those of Fustel de Coulanges or Engels, the *gens* was seen as a pre-state form of sociopolitical organization that might even have preceded private property. Such imaginative reconstructions ranged from a sort of primordial communism to group ownership regulated by custom.⁴⁶ Subsequent specialist scholarship, on the other hand, has successfully debunked the strong assumptions made in these reconstructions, but has on the whole given up hope of arriving at any firm conclusions.⁴⁷ It is of course very true that the evidence we have is contradictory and extremely incomplete, especially if one is looking for an ideal kin structure that existed in the same form regardless of time, space, rank, and individual group. Central Italian lineage groups probably varied regionally, by period

⁴⁵ Full argument in Terrenato 2007a.

⁴⁶ Fustel de Coulanges 1864; Engels 1884; Lomas 1996.

⁴⁷ A very extensive review of the literature is in Smith 2006.

and by social context. This is however particularly problematic for the kind of rigid classifications of social and familial relationships that characterized the descriptive approaches of classic ethnographical analyses. The terminology itself poses impossible problems, since the word *gens* was not always consistently used by Latin speakers (and other central Italians were of course using other terms), and modern terms like clan or descent group are not necessarily applicable. Moreover, the difference between the *gens* and the family (for which there was a corresponding Latin word) is also controversial. As in many other cases in this book, what is proposed here is an approximate approach to the problem, which involves trying to characterize the larger portion of the phenomenon with no claims to a complete coverage of all the possible variability. Leaving aside terminological debates, some key features of extended lineage groups, be they *gentes*, families, or anything else, will be highlighted, with specific reference to the aristocratic class of central Italy.⁴⁸

The most salient feature of elite social organization in central Italy during the first half of the first millennium BCE is undoubtedly the presence of larger lineage groups than the nuclear family in the modern sense of the term. There was certainly a range of possible situations between what the Romans called a *familia*, which was composed of a few closely related and cohabitating individuals together with their dependents and slaves, and the *gens* in the sense of a larger collection of such families sharing the same name and often the same ancestry, be it divine, heroic, or otherwise.⁴⁹ So what is more essential for us is not to determine the precise nature of the Roman or Italian *gens*, which is in any case probably impossible, but rather to outline some essential common traits to the various kinds of extended lineages in question. As a point of departure, it can be reasonably conjectured that these groups included multiple generations of the same male descent line, as well as cadet brothers and wives coming from other peer groups.⁵⁰ Perhaps the most clearly attested trait of these groups is the

⁴⁸ An argument could be made for describing these units as “houses” in the sense defined by C. Lévi-Strauss (1975: 164–92). While conceptually attractive, however, the term house will not be used in this book to avoid confusion with architectural house remains; Naglak and Terrenato [forthcoming](#).

⁴⁹ The literature on the Roman family is extensive, e.g., Gardner 1998; Rawson 2011; for the *gens*, Smith 2006, which makes a cogent argument for the variability of social forms that the term could cover.

⁵⁰ Patrilocality was clearly the predominant custom throughout the region. A synthesis on early Roman descent groups is in Linke 1995: 23–39; its essential traits were probably shared in the rest of central Italy.

existence of cults that were peculiar to its members.⁵¹ There is also considerable indication that there was an internal hierarchy and that, within it, some relatives were in a subordinate position, while there might have been one or more senior males in a leadership role.⁵² Some groups may also have had biologically unrelated people attached to them by links of debt, bondage, capture in war, or other social obligations.⁵³ Some sort of customary social control and internal regulation is likely to have existed, since later Roman legislation contained traces of it, such as the fact that unclaimed inheritance reverted to the *gens*, which also stepped in in cases of mental incompetence of one of its members.⁵⁴ Family leaders certainly had, even in later times, considerable powers over subordinate members, even to the point of life or death decisions (which, however, must have been the exception rather than the rule).⁵⁵ A certain amount of blurriness between the prerogatives of the family head and those of the leader of the broader group is to be expected given the range of lineage structures existing in central Italy in this period.

Another complex issue revolves around the definition of what constitutes a social elite and how that differs from the rest of the community. Any stringent statement in this sense would also have to be modulated across time and space. Rather than attempting that, elite and aristocracy are used here as interchangeable terms and, again, without claims to a clear-cut social differentiation. Recent works convincingly emphasize the fluidity of the definition, rejecting any idea of a closed and unchangeable caste.⁵⁶ For purposes of the argument presented in this book, it is enough to accept the existence of eminent lineages deriving their power and wealth from the control of land-based resources. In regions where arable land was very limited, other resources, such as animal husbandry, woodland products, or mining, would of course provide the access to surplus and leisure that characterized aristocrats.

The overall size of elite groups as well as their internal composition must have been very variable, and the tomb record can help determine it only very partially, especially since it appears that high-ranking members of the group were more likely to receive a proper burial than the rest.

⁵¹ Fiorentini 1988; Rieger 2007: 431–43.

⁵² For Rome, the evidence is collected in Romano 1984; Smith 2006: 34–35 denies that there was a hierarchy within the *gens*. New perspectives in Di Fazio and Paltineri 2019. On hierarchy within later incarnations of these groups, Martin 2002; Hölkeskamp 2010: 33.

⁵³ Torelli 1987: 87–95; Drummond 1989; Welwei 2001.

⁵⁴ Smith 2006: 51–55.

⁵⁵ The literature is vast, e.g., Lintott 1999: 25–29; Humbert 2005: 42–48.

⁵⁶ Hölkeskamp 2004; Bradley 2015.

At a minimum, however, some seventh-century mound tombs suggest the deposition of several dozen individuals in the course of two or three generations, implying that the parent population could not have been much smaller.⁵⁷ Later texts describe fifth-century top-level Roman *gentes* having hundreds of male members and even numbering in the thousands overall, but we cannot be sure that these figures are accurate.⁵⁸ What appears highly likely is that each group considered recourse to collective violence as an option that continued to be available to them even after the emergence of governments that would in theory have had a monopoly over these kinds of activities.⁵⁹ Telling in this sense is the finding of a group of identical bronze helmets all marked with the same family name at Vetulonia, which gives archeological substance to the narratives about “private wars” that were still occasionally waged in central Italy at least down to the fifth century. More evidence comes from the literary and epigraphic record, leading some scholars to see these groups as temporary warbands operating under the leadership of a lord (see [Figure 2.4](#)).⁶⁰ Summer raiding warfare must have played a significant role in the life cycle of these groups, allowing them to accumulate resources as well as negotiate internal hierarchies and reinforce the warrior ideology that is implied by the nature of many of their grave goods.

It is also possible that these groups had a role in the managing and distribution of resources, especially land-based ones. There is some textual evidence suggesting that elite lineages were rooted in particular areas of which they controlled, at least originally, the exploitation. This would be attested by the fact that the territorial tribes of Rome, probably established in the sixth or fifth century, were mostly named after important *gentes*.⁶¹ Moreover, some legal sources imply, even at a later stage, that there was land owned collectively by the *gens*, while, as we have seen, unclaimed inheritances would revert to the same group. There is also some indication that its leadership could regulate access to some of these resources. Parcels of land could be temporarily or permanently apportioned to group members and nuclear families, while pasture, woods, and other nonarable

⁵⁷ Riva 2010b; Naso 2011. For earlier periods, the claim has been made that clusters of graves with similar traits belonged to the same lineage group, Bietti Sestieri 1992a: 199–220.

⁵⁸ Most notably, the story about the leader of the Claudii migrating to Rome in 504 BCE with 6,000 including lineage members and dependents; Wiseman 1979: 57–70.

⁵⁹ Timpe 1990; Welwei 1993; Rawlings 1999; Gabrielli 2003; Torelli 2011.

⁶⁰ For the helmets, Becker 2010; more generally, Armstrong 2016: 70–71; 87–88; Rich 2017; Maras 2018.

⁶¹ Franciosi 1995; Rieger 2007: 345–464.

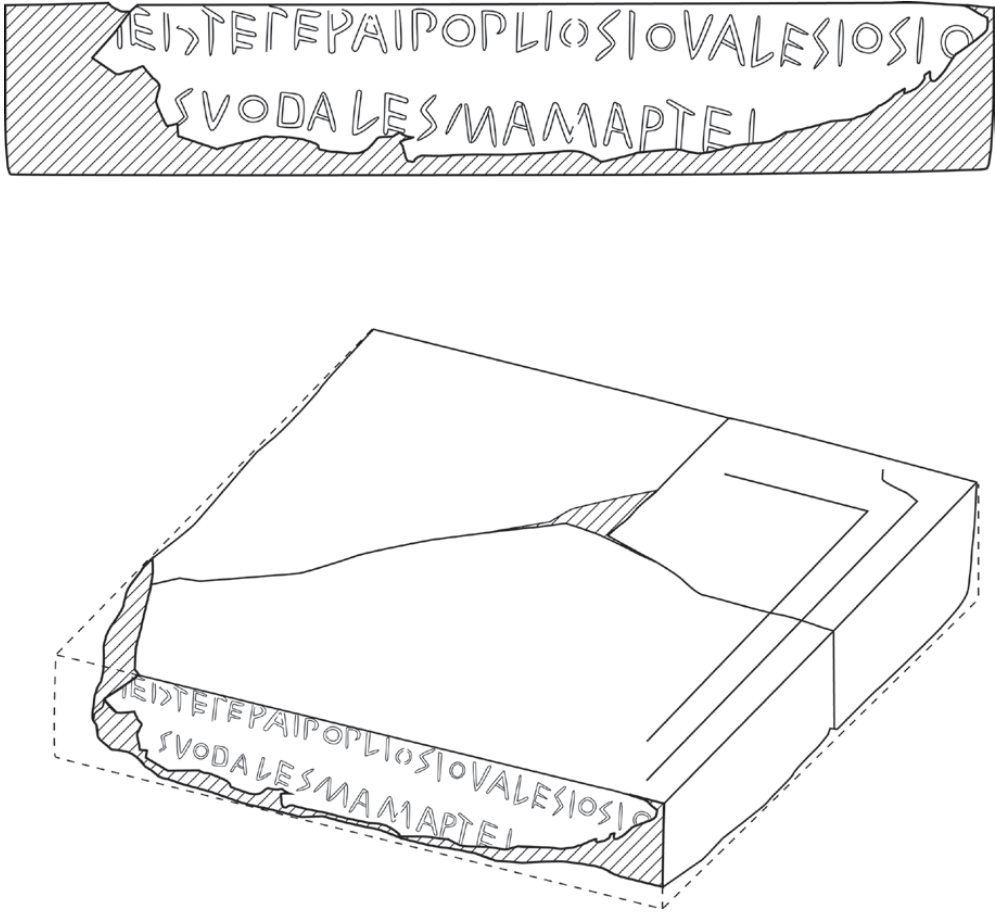


Figure 2.4 Drawing of a late sixth-century Latin inscription found in a temple context at Satricum. It records a dedication made by members of a warband (*suodales*), connected with the god Mars, to a Publius Valerius. The latter could possibly be identified with the very prominent Roman politician P. Valerius Poplicola, a factional leader who seems to have had ambitions of dominance (Versnel 1997; Di Fazio 2017). If the identification is correct, his case would exemplify how aristocrats could play the republican game while at the same time maintaining private armies and connections in other cities (image reprinted from Armstrong, Jeremy 2016. *War and Society in Early Rome: from Warlords to Generals*. Cambridge University Press, courtesy of J. Armstrong).

areas could remain communal and their use controlled by the leaders.⁶² Individual private ownership of land probably replaced this traditional system over time, but customary prerogatives and obligations for those in

⁶² The evidence is primarily linked to the concept of land belonging to the *gens*, Capogrossi Colognesi 1994: 1–13.

positions of power in extended families may have survived in some form. A high degree of local variability is to be expected, with possible gray areas between the attributions of the lineages and those of the nuclear families. For sure, down to historical times, heads of important houses would have an important redistributive role for their social dependents, providing a supply buffer during bad years and other exceptional circumstances. In a broader sense, the leader, significantly called “father” in Latin, was perceived to have a clear responsibility for the welfare of all those who were in a subordinate position. His power came with a responsibility to provide for their survival.⁶³ This obviously relied on his ability to extract surplus from the rest of the group on a regular basis, probably not in the form of tributes or taxes but rather as customary contributions and ad hoc requests, in the form of food, corvée labor, shares of the crops, political support, and much else.

Whether these extended lineages actually cohabitated is not easy to determine and may have depended on the circumstances, but what is far more important is that they cooperated toward common objectives, such as the creation of massive mound tombs or luxurious residences in the emerging city and in its hinterland. This profound loyalty to a larger group than just first-degree relatives is a key element in the predominant Italian mentality of the period.⁶⁴ Individual needs and priorities were routinely sacrificed for the greater good of the lineage group, its prestige and reputation trumping most other considerations. The individual members of course received a very significant material advantage from belonging to a highly respected group, but often the direct consequences of their actions would only benefit other members or even future generations, as happened in the case of elaborate burial preparations or of self-sacrificing actions that resulted in certain death on the battlefield. In this sense, it is important not to see the forces underpinning the cohesion of these lineages in purely functional terms. There was a deeply shared worldview, reinforced by religious beliefs and traditional cultural values, that kept the group members together and made sense of their everyday experience. There were cults in Rome that were only open to members of a specific lineage, and this strongly suggests that most of these groups had distinctive ritual practices, probably connected with ancestor worship, that played a big role in forging a group identity and in fostering a strong loyalty and

⁶³ E.g., Bettini 1991; Saller 1994.

⁶⁴ For Rome, e.g., Baroin 2010; Osgood 2011. It is worth pointing out that group identities of this kind are common in many preindustrial societies. They are connected with anthropological concepts like dividuality and familism; Silverman 1975; Strathern 1988; review in Viazzo 2003.

sense of belonging to it.⁶⁵ A further contribution to strong internal cohesion derived from claims of common descent, typically receding back into mythical times and interwoven with ritual practices.

Ethnographically, there might be similarities with the way in which clans functioned in a number of state and nonstate societies. From those better known examples, we see that these extended lineage groups were not necessarily perfectly harmonic entities. Their ranking members could be struggling and fighting for preeminence and these tensions could even lead to outbreaks of violence and to power abruptly switching from one noble line to another. The relationship between the leadership and the subordinates also could contain a strong dialectic element. Such tensions, however, were constrained by the boundaries of a hegemonic and paternalistic society, and as a result social mobility could exist in these groups, but there was also a very rigid code that established a range of acceptable behaviors for its members.⁶⁶ They all had well-defined expectations about each other's attitudes in the relationship. Violations of such customary norms, for example excessive requests by the leadership or disloyalty from the subordinate members, would produce hostile responses. The leader could easily mete out punishments ranging from restricting access to resource redistribution to expulsion and death.⁶⁷ But the rest of the group was not completely helpless either. They had recourse to a variety of unfriendly responses including various forms of resistance, feet dragging, and even the switch of allegiances. Moving from one group to another was probably unusual but not impossible, especially for clients, allowing them to "vote with their feet" and placing an implicit deterrent to immoderate exploitation from the elites.⁶⁸

In conclusion, it seems clear from the archeological evidence that in each of the emerging cities there was a good number of these extended lineages coexisting within the same notional settlement boundaries and, later, city walls. A particularly well-preserved example now comes from the city of Gabii,

⁶⁵ Smith 2006: 44–50; Lipka 2009: 168–75.

⁶⁶ Hölkeskamp 2010: 33–36.

⁶⁷ The existence of conflict within a lineage is of course particularly difficult to detect without ethnographic observation. Some faint echoes are perceptible in the narratives about factionalism and even crime within royal families (like the Tarquins), about the fission of lineages, and the exile of individual members; Thomas 1981; Monaco 1988. A hypothesis in this sense in Meunier 2019. At the comparative level, such conflicts, defined as feuding, are reportedly endemic to social formations of this kind; Oakley 2014.

⁶⁸ Behaviors of this kind at the nonelite level are of course hard to detect in the archeological record. Again, comparative and theoretical models suggest that this must have been a widespread dynamics; e.g., Güterk, Irlenbusch, and Rockenbach 2009; Armstrong 2016: 60.

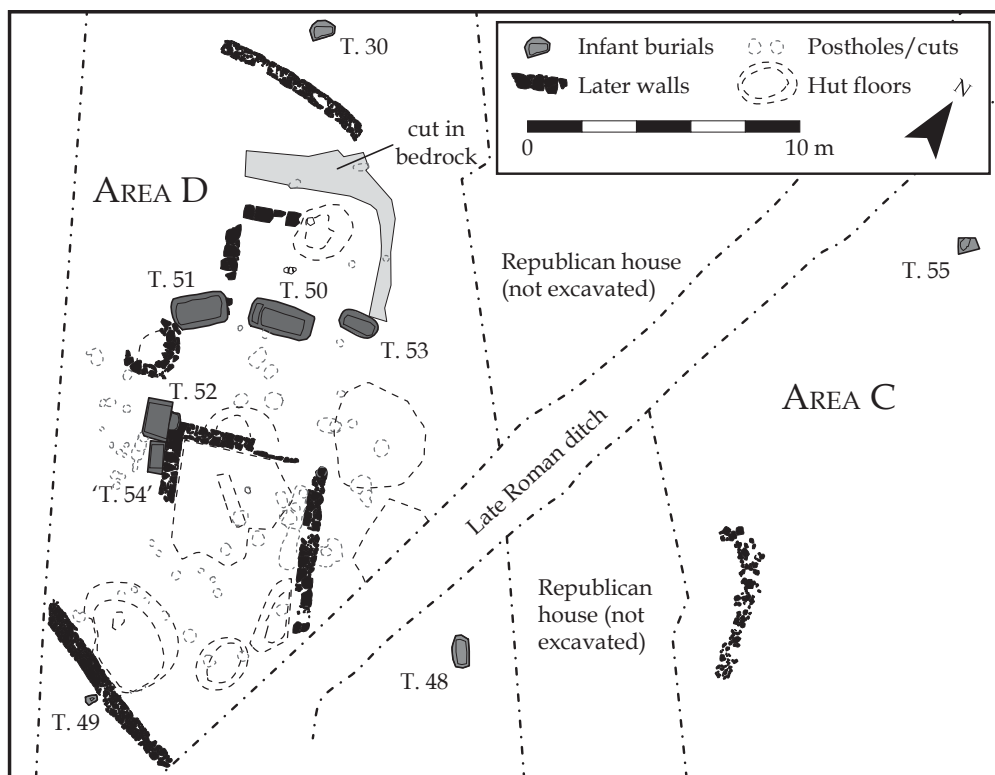


Figure 2.5 Plan of a cluster of huts dating from the eighth and seventh centuries from Gabii. They provide a sense of how one of the settled areas shaded in [Figure 2.1](#) might have appeared. The presence of infant burials with very rich goods around the apse of the main hut indicated the presence of at least one major elite lineage (image reprinted from Mogetta, Marcello, and Cohen, Sheira forthcoming. “Infant and Child Burial Practices from an Élite Domestic Compound at Early Iron Age and Orientalising Gabii,” in J. Tabolli (ed.), *From Invisible to Visible. New Data and Methods for the Archaeology of Infant and Child Burials in Pre-Roman Italy*. Uppsala: Åstrom, courtesy of M. Mogetta and S. Cohen).

where excavation has shown the persistence of a hut group inhabited by elites and nonelites and surrounded by rich infant burials (see [Figure 2.5](#)).⁶⁹ Despite the frequent claims made to the contrary, groups of this kind did not dissolve over time in an egalitarian citizenship body but instead continued to exist and to be highly relevant in the political dynamic of the city, since their presence is amply attested in later historical times. Similar groups, if one is to judge from the burial evidence, also existed in the countryside, away from urban centers,

⁶⁹ Evans, et al. forthcoming; Mogetta and Cohen forthcoming.

and in regions, like Samnium, that were not urbanized at all.⁷⁰ Apparently, some extended families had a lesser status and, for instance in Rome, could not describe themselves as *gentes*.⁷¹ This, however, became less of a problem over time, and in any case, whatever their descriptor, even these “lesser” groups behaved in very similar ways to the main ones. There is also reason to suspect that there were substantial numbers of people who were not members of any of these lineage groups, nor of their social and economic subordinates. This appears especially true in those sectors of society that were not directly involved in agricultural and other land-based activities. A growing number of artisans, small traders, shop owners, performers, architects, artists, and other (often traveling) specialists gathered in the expanding urban centers and they seem to have enjoyed an increasing degree of freedom and independence from the power and influence of the landowning aristocracy.⁷²

Whatever their precise character, name, or evolution over time, there seems to be enough evidence to conclude that in the period from the emergence of cities to the beginning of the conquest there were elite lineage groups larger than the nuclear family that characterized especially landed aristocracies throughout central Italy and played an important role as structuring elements within the emerging cities. Rooted in religious and ancestral beliefs, regulated by customary practices, and strengthened by reciprocal obligations between its members, these units represented important elements of continuity and were foci of fierce loyalty throughout the period in question.

Interactions and Integrations between Elite Groups

If we accept the idea that extended elite (or elite-led) lineage groups represented, in all their heterogeneity and variability, a foundational element that shaped early first millennium BCE society in central Italy, then it makes sense to consider how their mutual interactions evolved over time, so that we can understand their impact on broader political developments. There can be little doubt that these groups, from the very beginning, were keenly aware of the existence of peer entities distributed across their entire

⁷⁰ Cosentino, D’Ercole, and Mieli 2003; Prayon 2011.

⁷¹ There is an enormous debate on the theory that plebeian families in Rome originally did not have a *gens* organization. This is probably linked to complex social stratifications and struggles but does not change the essential nature of central Italian structure; Richard 1978; Oakley 2005b: 112–16.

⁷² Although of course some of these figures may have also been socially dependent on aristocratic groups. The narrative about the artists being in the retinue of the Tarquins is often discussed in this context; Nijboer 1997; Nijboer 1998; Smith 1998; Ammerman, et al. 2015.

region. Indeed, it has been accepted for a while that the burial record, at least since the Late Bronze Age, bears out an active competition between elite lineages for prestige expressed through luxury and exotic goods, as well as adherence to a warrior ideology.⁷³ Moreover, the similarities and recurrences in funerary practices and elite tastes strongly suggest that these groups were in contact with each other across considerable distances. In fact, it is likely that prestige and status were pursued, among other means, by developing a complex network of relationships with other groups of the upper crust. These interactions could of course take many different forms, depending on the context, the period, and the cultures involved, but, generally speaking, they constituted a dialectical space that had a great significance for its participants and was aimed at creating links that were beneficial to their prestige and influence.

A set of elite group behaviors were specifically aimed, from the earliest times, at fostering and regulating relationships between the lineages. Such was the case of gift exchange, which is attested by the funerary evidence and probably affected entire groups as well as prominent individuals within them. Reciprocal and escalating gift-giving is a classic way in which prestige is asserted, while at the same time establishing and maintaining friendly ties.⁷⁴ We know that, in later periods, friendship between entire lineages existed and took a highly ritualized form, regulated by the exchange of presents, visits, and obligations to hospitality. Depictions of aristocratic banqueting are ubiquitous from the very beginning of figurative art in the region (see [Figure 2.6](#)). Ceremonial drinking and communal libations thus contributed to seal these bonds, which were further reinforced by a firm belief in the sacredness of the guest and were guaranteed by divine sanction. Tokens could be formally exchanged to allow the identification of members of a friendly lineage not known personally, again suggesting that relatively large numbers of people composed each group (see [Figure 2.7](#)).⁷⁵ A well-developed network of links of this kind was essential to the good functioning of an aristocratic group, allowing safer travel, exchange of information, access to exotic items, practical assistance, and cooperation. In a pinch, one could find shelter from disgrace or exile with a friendly lineage. Such networks apparently included short- and long-distance ties and easily spanned ethnic boundaries and cultural and religious differences.

⁷³ Bietti Sestieri 1992a: 203–20; Bietti Sestieri 2011.

⁷⁴ The classic text is Mauss 1925. For its application to early central Italy, Cristofani 1975; Maras and Sciacca 2011. See also Riva 2010a.

⁷⁵ On banqueting, Zaccaria Ruggiu 2003; Colivicchi 2017. For token exchange, Colonna 1981; Poccetti 2011.



Figure 2.6 Architectural terracotta from an elite Etruscan residence at Acquarossa. Dated to the sixth century BCE, it is decorated with a banquet scene. Couples of male and female aristocrats recline on couches, with tables laden with food and hunting dogs crouching under them (Zaccaria Ruggiu 2003: 186–197; Fontaine 2016). Images of this kind are indicative of the lifestyle that characterized elite lineages in this period (photo by D. Diffendale).

It also is quite likely that from early on, intermarriage was actively used as a diplomatic tool, as indicated by a combination of epigraphic evidence and textual narratives. Again, later on it would certainly be one of the predominant strategies that lineages could use to forge wide-ranging horizontal ties that would last at least a generation. At that point, exogamy was not prescribed but it appears to have been very common.⁷⁶ Another way of obtaining a similar effect must have been adoption (most often of nonorphaned adults from peer families), a custom that was unusually common among elites in Roman historical times, and would have forged a blood link between the two lineages involved. Suggestively, in some unverifiable narratives about early Roman and Etruscan kings, a sort of occasional matrilinearity is implied, combining intermarriage and adoption: the king

⁷⁶ Franciosi 1988; Bartoloni and Pitzalis 2011. In later Roman society the marriages continued to be arranged with considerations of this kind in mind, Treggiari 1991.

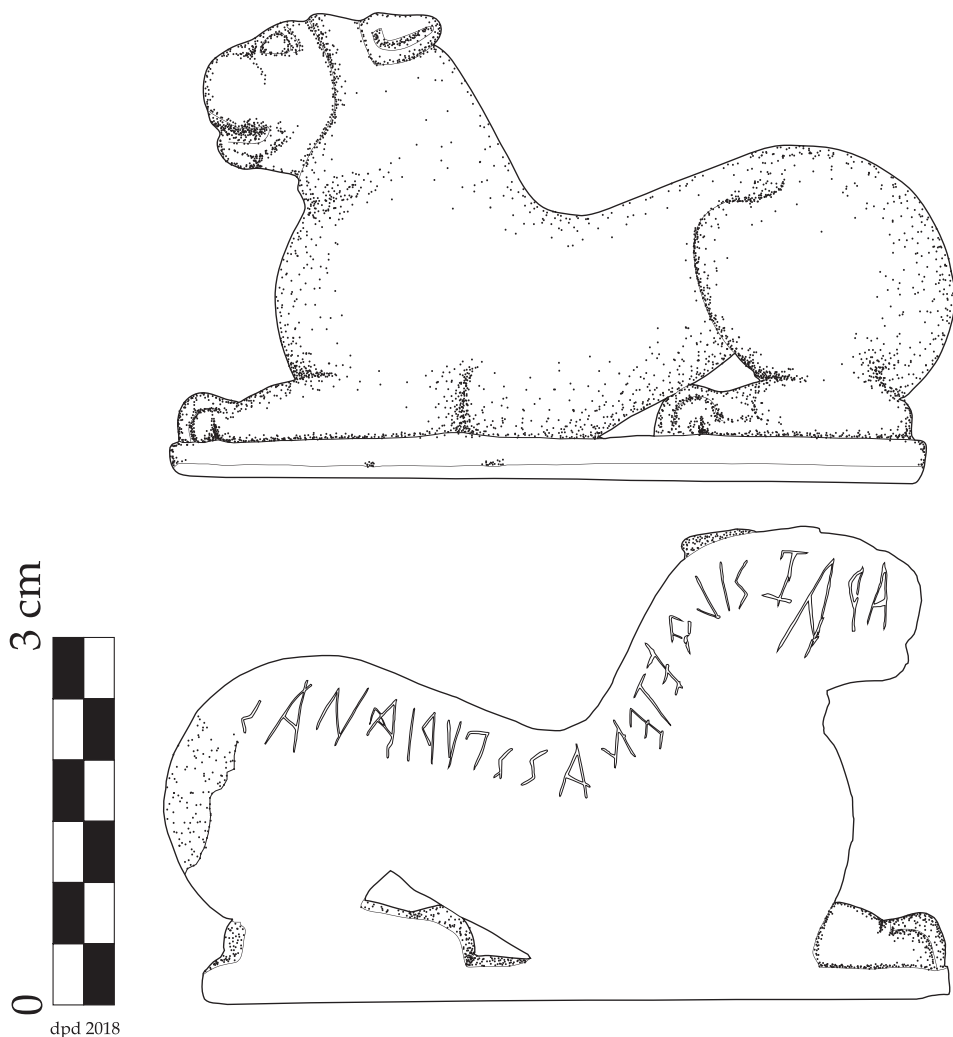


Figure 2.7 Ivory plaque in the shape of a lion from the harbor sanctuary of Sant’Omobono in Rome. Dated to the sixth century, it was longitudinally sawed in two, to create matching halves. It has an incised inscription with the name of an Etruscan man, Araz Silqetenas (perhaps from Sardinia?), who may have been the dedicant. These matching pieces are generally interpreted as tokens of family friendship (*tesserae hospitales*; Naso 2017a: 1541). They indicate alliances between groups of aristocrats large enough that forms of personal identification were required. The involvement of an Etruscan family in Rome is further proof that such factional friendships easily crossed ethnic lines (illustration by D. Diffendale).

is sometimes succeeded by his daughter's husband, who thus appears to have been adopted into the royal family.⁷⁷

In light of what has been reconstructed so far, it would seem reasonable to assume that each elite lineage had an articulated system of relationships to a number of peer groups. With a select few there would have been an exchange of members through marriage or adoption (in addition to other links), while with all the others there would be friendly ties of mutual gift-giving, hospitality, productive and military assistance, communal feasting and hunting, and much else. Later on, there would be a clear sense that friends of friends were also friends, leading naturally to the emergence of sprawling (and potentially conflicting) networks of lineage friendship spanning over long distances. There are references to elites forging military alliances that were activated for coups and other political endeavors.⁷⁸ The fact that these bonds between groups were sacred was a powerful force, but it certainly would not have completely deterred unfriendly behaviors. Misunderstandings, tension, quarrels, and even outright betrayal would be a fact of life, leading to broken friendships, network fissions, and realignments that could radically change the landscape of elite interaction. Ties must have needed to be frequently renewed and reinforced with ethical and religious elements to last over several generations, but could easily turn into their exact opposites. Contrasts, enmities, and even bloody and drawn-out feuds and vendettas could not have been rare, being fueled by rigid honor codes and by warrior mentalities. At any given point in time, each lineage must have had some dear friends, some mortal enemies, and many other intermediate shades between the two extremes.⁷⁹

Given the prevalence of raiding warfare over short distances, it can be expected that conflict could become particularly acute among local peer groups. In these contexts, over time, attempts to establish some sort of priority or paramountcy of one lineage over another by means of threat and actual violence are to be expected. The narratives recorded later refer to assassinations and even small wars between lineages, as well as to ritualized forms of conflict, such as military displays or champion's fights. Private wars between a lineage and an entire community apparently could be waged, if as

⁷⁷ See the contributions in Corbier 1999. For royal succession, Cantarella 1987: 100–05; Koptev 2005.

⁷⁸ Such is the predominant interpretation of the function of the attested war fellowships (*sodalitates*); Armstrong 2016: 51; see also p. 47.

⁷⁹ One of the best documents in this sense is represented by the paintings in the Francois tomb at Vulci, which depict aristocrats from various cities dueling each other; Buranelli 1987; historical interpretation in Maras 2010; Massa-Pairault 2014.

late as the fifth century the aristocratic Roman lineage of the Fabii marched out against Veii, when the rest of the Romans would not follow them in the endeavor.⁸⁰ It is not unusual to hear that some lineages, as late as the fifth century, would start a wholesale relocation to a different subregion because of local enmities or danger. Early Greek cities, about which we are much better informed historically, seem to have been affected by similar dynamics, if really an elite Corinthian family escaped to Etruria during the seventh century and was, two generations later, able to relocate again, this time to Rome. Such horizontal social mobility, in which groups move across space without losing any of their social status, is generally accepted as an important trait of the central Mediterranean aristocratic world.⁸¹ What it highlights is the fact that there was, from the earliest times, an implicit elite solidarity that underlay all interactions between lineages. In a way, the customary code of behavior seems to have been that aristocrats could plot, ambush, and slaughter each other as much as they wanted, as long as they subscribed, at the same time, to a conservative view of social order in which vertical mobility was severely hampered and constrained. Access of new groups within the aristocracy was to be minimized. It did happen, but not frequently, at least until much later. Clients and lesser group members were expected to side with their leaders, perhaps participate in raids and violence, but were not to take advantage of any instability to try to improve their social standing. Indeed, there seems to have been an unspoken agreement between elite groups to support each other in case of internal unrest.⁸² Later on, a solidarity of this kind between elites would be a powerful component of their ethos and would often come before any other ethnic, political, or religious consideration, representing a long-term trait of the central Italian world that is crucial to the overall argument presented here.

The Nature of Early States in Central Italy

It is useful to consider the emergence of cities and states in central Italy against the background provided by the social landscape of lineages as it has been described so far. Until recently, this was a fairly unexplored area, as most published work tended to concentrate on the chronology of the

⁸⁰ See pp. 112–13.

⁸¹ On the movement of the Tarquins, Ampolo 1976–77. On the migration of the Claudii, Wiseman 1979: 57–75. On mobility in general, Cornell 2003; Bourdin 2012: 521–50.

⁸² Drummond 1989; Armstrong 2016: 70. This is a trait that is very common to many forms of landed aristocracy across different contexts; Black 2004.

formation process (and on its temporal relationship with the creation of the earliest Greek colonies), as well as on the archeologically visible features and traits that would characterize the new political entities. For the purposes of this book, however, it is not essential to determine what the signature indicator of statehood was, nor whether it first appeared in the eighth or, say, the sixth century. It can be safely taken for granted that states associated with urbanism came into being over the course of this period, and that they were firmly in place by the time the expansion began. The real question, for anyone interested in the decision-making process behind Roman imperialism, is instead how power and collective action were transacted in these states, especially with regard to the existing lineage-based social hierarchies and control structures. In other words, once states are formed we see the same kind of landed aristocratic lineages in leadership positions as there were before, so it might be instructive to examine how these social actors became a part of the new developments and, judging from the results, apparently managed to steer them in a direction that was favorable for them. At the same time, we must also reject the teleology that naturally comes from enjoying the hindsight of three millennia of state evolution and wonder instead with fresh eyes at what motivated these agents to go in the directions they did, analogously to what we intend to do for the empire-building of the second half of the millennium. Instead of simply assuming, as is often done in the literature, that there was an inherent need for states and cities to emerge (and later on to expand), it is essential to determine why did central Italian elites decide to create or participate in a radically different new system, and even more importantly, how did they reconcile it with their established sociocultural structures.⁸³

Without a doubt, the first important decision that broke with past lifeways and started the new course must have been taken as early as the ninth century, when a number of elite lineages, together with other people, resettled to the plateaus that would become the new cities. Needless to say, in terms of human ecology, this was a counterproductive move that would automatically reduce considerably per capita access to agricultural resources.⁸⁴ It can be hypothesized, in light of what has been argued so far, that they did so with a view to improve their interactions through increased proximity, cohabitation in the same geographic setting, and communal defense. Although the later narratives invariably center on founding heroes who

⁸³ The argument summarized in this section can be found in full in Terrenato and Motta 2006; Terrenato 2011.

⁸⁴ E.g., Norton 1979.

become rulers of the new city, it is highly unlikely that the existing social units simply and immediately dissolved into the homogenous citizenship of a kingdom. The patchy occupation of the sites suggests instead that deep internal divisions remained within the new communities. The tomb clusters and the burial mounds speak eloquently of proud lineage groups, whose prestigious display of prominence was evidently a much higher priority than their loyalty to the new polity. It is clear that these component units approached the coalescence of the state gingerly, maintaining a strong sense of group identity.⁸⁵ An obvious advantage that the new development would have afforded is mutual protection. With the possible exception of Rome, all the sites chosen for aggregation are naturally fortified. Having a sizable population (including many heavily armored warriors) living there would be a powerful deterrent against raids from outside. It might even be conjectured that, at least in part, the new community could be formed by one or more networks of friendly lineage groups that used to live further apart and decided to tighten their ties by coming to live on the same plateau. This would also of course make their other elite-bonding activities, like feasting or hunting together, much easier.

As time went on, the benefits that the new sites offered must have grown in the eyes of the inhabitants. This is reflected in the increasing investment made in the eighth and seventh centuries on communal projects like artificial fortifications, public cults, and meeting spaces. In order for these endeavors to be possible, some sort of ground rules must have been necessarily agreed on. For instance, it appears fairly certain in the case of Rome that from an early stage a prohibition against bearing weapons inside the city was put in place.⁸⁶ The affected area corresponded to that of burial exclusion, around which the new fortifications were being created. The validity of military commands also expired once inside the walls. In this way, a shared spatial notion was established, differentiating in proto-legal form the behaviors that were acceptable outside and inside the city. In warrior societies of this kind, the demilitarization of the settlement cannot have been an obvious innovation, but it was probably a necessary one to mitigate violence between lineages belonging to the same city. It may well have developed as a permanent form of the temporary truces that were

⁸⁵ Pacciarelli 2010.

⁸⁶ This is better attested in the case of Rome, where from very early times there was an urban boundary within which it was forbidden, indeed sacrilegious, to bear arms and to bury adults, and which also had a religious significance in the taking of the omens; Liou-Gille 1997; Simonelli 2001; Drogula 2007. Similar limits would have existed in other central Italian cities, as the distribution of burials and epigraphic texts suggest; Prosdocimi 2004: 1722.

declared on the occasion of religious festivals or athletic games.⁸⁷ The very existence of a provision of this kind (together with the countless instances during the first millennium BCE that the rule was broken all over Italy), however, is a proof that the new states only had a very imperfect monopoly over armed violence and that their internal conflicts could never be completely mitigated, much less resolved. When things worked as planned, cities could serve as neutral arenas for interactions between neighboring elite groups, allowing them to regiment their dialectics and cooperate in projects that were beyond the scope of each individual group. Throughout their life, however, these states remained congenitally prone to periods of instability. For this reason they could be characterized as weak, since their long-term history shows that the powers that created them always retained the option of temporarily revoking the rules they were based on, thus reverting to the kind of free-for-all conflict that existed before the process of urbanization.⁸⁸

Emulation and peer-polity interaction are other factors that may have convinced some elites to find state governments acceptable, if not desirable. The parallel and synchronic developments in many central Italian cities can only be explained if they were keeping careful track of what was happening in other communities. More generally, we must remember that large swaths of the central Mediterranean coast were turning, at the same time, into a system of interconnected small states, each containing one city, whose interaction presented participating elites with opportunities that did not exist before. As trade and interstate politics intensified over time, it became more effective to negotiate spheres of influence at the level of diplomacy between cities, even over long distances, as attested by the existence of a treaty between Rome and Carthage as early as the late sixth century.⁸⁹ More generally, whole urban aggregates began to engage in the same kind of competition for prestige that the elite groups had been involved in for centuries, only on a much greater scale. The luster that came from having a particularly magnificent fortification wall or a beautifully decorated temple was a positive reflection on all the member lineages of the successful city. Major sanctuaries in cities, near harbors, at road intersections, and in other strategic locations were popping up all over central Italy and acquiring a very important role as political arenas where elites could enhance their visibility, exchange information, create and maintain alliances, and much

⁸⁷ Orlin 2010: 49–50.

⁸⁸ Views of the early state in these terms are implicit in Brandt 1985; Rawlings 1999; Hölkeskamp 2010.

⁸⁹ Nörr 2005; Colonna 2010; Scardigli 2011; Wiater 2018.

else.⁹⁰ While some of these cult-places do emerge in nonurbanized areas, the vast majority of them are clearly supported by at least one urban center, offering another example of the rewards that the new polities could offer. Analogously, access to the great Mediterranean-wide religious hubs, like the oracle at Delphi, could be facilitated through membership in a recognized state.

To ambitious kin groups, the processes reviewed so far must have appeared as good reasons to help put together a city or to join an existing one. Indeed, for some it may have been an indispensable move to keep up with their elite peers. At the same time, if this radical transformation had resulted in a massive social revolution toward a de-feudalized society, it would have defeated the original purposes of the aristocracies that had promoted it. Since the original power base of these groups was rooted in their control over resources and groups of social dependents, they should be expected to want to retain their traditional areas of influence. While the evidence is of course scanty, there is in fact very little sign of a significant change in the social structure, at least until the advanced sixth century, when the cities had been firmly established. The burial and settlement records remain structurally unaltered and the dominant position of these groups was still unchallenged when the historical records become more reliable.⁹¹ It can therefore be hypothesized that central Italian state formation involved a compromise that combined lineages together in larger entities without too much disruption to their traditional functions and prerogatives.

It may be useful to reflect, albeit tentatively, on how this compromise between Bronze Age social structures and early Iron Age state formation worked in practice. A basic observation that can be made is that, in essence, the social dominance as well as the internal arrangements of each lineage group were the least impacted, while what was transformed was the relationship between these groups, which became more regulated and cooperative. It is very clear from the later legal literature that the leadership of these lineages continued to resolve internal controversies and administer punishments to group members down to historical times.⁹² At another level, however, and in matters pertaining to the interaction between lineages belonging to the same state, the power of the leader was suspended and transferred to an overarching political structure. This involved accepting that one or more of the other peer aristocrats had temporary jurisdiction

⁹⁰ Rendeli 1989; Marroni 2012; Potts 2015.

⁹¹ Smith 1996: 185–223.

⁹² Gardner 1998; Frier and McGinn 2004: 193–235.

over interlineage affairs in their capacity as kings, tyrants, magistrates, or high priests. Even more importantly, the all-in code of confrontation was suspended at specific times and places, to allow dialogue without the constant risk of deadly violence. A council of leaders and notables may have been created to resolve conflicts and to guide the federated aristocratic groups. The evidence for the early presence of state-level personal leadership is not very strong, unless some credence is lent to the narratives about the kings of Rome and their interactions with those of other cities. Kings, however, are certainly mentioned in inscriptions and graffiti from the sixth century, and historians of religion appear confident that some priesthoods in Rome date back to the archaic period.⁹³

There is a question that needs to be discussed at this point, concerning political changes that would take place in the late sixth–early fifth century and would lead to a broader participation in government in some central Italian states. Scholars have posited a connection between the narratives about the establishment of the Roman Republic, the standardization and leveling of burial display in some Etruscan graveyards, and the supposed introduction of regular spear line infantry (as well as some possible epigraphic data) to conclude that state power was now shared among a much larger proportion of its participants.⁹⁴ These claims are difficult to prove or disprove, but it seems hard to believe that whatever change may have happened, it would have radically transformed the basic social structure of these polities, since we see landed lineages still firmly dominating the republican political process in later periods, for which we are better informed. It is far more likely that the number of elite lineages that had access to the highest levels of government was somewhat increased and that their interactions were more tightly regulated.⁹⁵ The long-term persistence of traditional social building blocks in these states does not mean that these polities would not have their own complex internal dynamics, as a result of which changes in the balance among elites could take place. The narratives about early constitutional reforms (like the one credited to

⁹³ The debate on the historical status of the kings of Rome (and of the few other kings of other states that are mentioned in the textual sources) has been raging for centuries. For recent examples, Cornell 1995; Poucet 2000; Martínez-Pinna 2009; Walter 2017. For the priesthoods, overview in Smith 2007.

⁹⁴ Besides the cited literature on the transition to a republican system in Rome, similar arguments have been made for Etruscan states as well, e.g., Cifani 2003; Torelli 2016b; Tagliamonte 2017.

⁹⁵ Processes of this kind have been conceptualized in the Greek world using the notion of isonomy; e.g., Hoepfner and Schwandner 1986; Colivicchi 2014.

the king Servius Tullius) probably need to be understood in this sense.⁹⁶ Precisely the weakness and fragility of the truce imposed by the state to the elite groups always left open the door to renegotiations of the agreements between them, both in pacific and in violent ways. Just as there could be disagreement within the lineages, so there could be conflict among them.

It seems clear that political strife, in the form of violations of the rules, bloodshed, assassinations, coups, and even full-blown military clashes, was not an infrequent occurrence within (as well as among) central Italian early states. Again, it should not be forgotten that these behaviors had been typical of elite interactions before the regulatory framework that was introduced by the new cities. In a way, these outbreaks of private violence were equivalent to a temporary abrogation of the state by those elites that had exhausted or had become frustrated with the options offered by it. This kind of instability could result in rewritings of the rules after they had proven unable to regulate and mitigate the conflict. Indeed, early cities tended to be frequently reorganized by means of political reforms, of new constitutions, and of codes that were often promulgated by charismatic lawgivers or by committees of sages. Interestingly, there is a definite sense that these arbiters of the conflict ideally should be placed above or outside its fray, by virtue of their social standing, high learning, holiness, or even foreignness. Such an acute need for a neutral mediator is a further confirmation of the strain and diffidence that characterized the interactions between aristocrats belonging to the same state.⁹⁷

In many ways, the emerging state can be seen to occupy an interstitial, nonaligned position among the jurisdictions of the lineages, primarily regulating those areas, like their interactions, that were not otherwise covered by the preexisting power structure. This takes an evident material form in the spatial choices made in the creation of central public spaces in the cities. A very good example is provided by the square of the Forum in Rome, which was placed in a previously uninhabited, flood-prone lowland between the hills, on which most of the settlement evidence was found. After an extremely laborious communal reclamation project, this area became the premier public space of the city, with the explicit symbolic significance of a truce space that was free from existing aristocratic encroachments in the form of houses, cults, or even recent burials.⁹⁸ Paramount public cults, like that of Juno Regina in Veii, also played a conspicuous role

⁹⁶ Smith 1997; Vernole 2002.

⁹⁷ Koptev 2005; Lewis 2007.

⁹⁸ Ammerman 1990; Ammerman 1996; Ammerman 2011; Hopkins 2014.

in providing an appropriate focus for the new urban identity. Significantly, however, the new public sanctuaries by themselves did not completely eliminate or homogenize existing private cults, underscoring once more the ambivalence of aristocratic behavior. Depending on the context, elite individuals could be high priests of the entire city, negotiating the favor of the gods for some communal action, or they could be doing that only for their lineage, or for another subset of the community, like the army in the field.⁹⁹

Even when the political contract did not break down altogether, there was always a deep tension between the traditional power structure of the lineages and the new level of interaction created by the state. This would have forced the aristocrats to adopt different patterns of behavior depending on the circumstances. Absolute rulers at home and constrained citizens in council, these men had to juggle the two roles as well as they could to further both their cities and their lineages through a combination of strategies. Although in theory defined by the implicit social contract underpinning the state, the boundaries between the power domain pertaining to the elite lineages and what had been transferred to the broader community were open to different interpretations. Consequently, they were contested and renegotiated at each step, leaving room for major clashes of contrasting viewpoints. The tension between private rule and public compliance would go on to constitute a long-term element of central Italian society. It will continue to be interpreted in different forms, and its presence will shape the very nature of the Roman territorial empire.

Long-Distance Interactions

While the process of state formation in central Italy has necessarily drawn attention to the interactions happening at the local level in each emerging center, it should not be forgotten that long-distance elite relationships had existed and had played an important role since the Bronze Age. Judging from the increased evidence for gift exchange and intermarriage (as well as from elements that can be evinced from the written narratives), these interactions increased further once the cities were in place.¹⁰⁰ It is essential to deconstruct the assumption of nineteenth-century nationalist historians that the rise of states would automatically segregate urban elites by tying

⁹⁹ Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1–30. The presence of huts underneath some temples, for instance at Satricum, illustrates how some private cults became public; De Waele 1997. See also Torelli 2017.

¹⁰⁰ E.g., Gras 1985; overview now in Cangemi 2016.

their loyalty, friendship, and cooperation exclusively to the cities and to the ethnic groups to which they belonged. It is true that neighboring lineages were now clustered together in new political entities, which came with their own additional layer of ties and constraints. In many areas, beginning with interstate diplomacy, elites would often be represented by their city's government and they could benefit from alliances and friendships existing between entire cities. But it would not have been in their best interest to abandon completely the private networks that they had painstakingly created and maintained, sometimes over many centuries. The resulting interplay between the contacts at the state and the lineage level evidently had the potential of generating a great amount of complexity in central Italian politics of this period. This area is worth investigating in some detail, since it is arguable that it had a considerable impact in shaping the unification process later on.

At a basic level, having elite connections outside the city was of course useful for the same reasons it was before the advent of states: it created a network of mutual support and it facilitated the circulation of gifts and information, the travel of lineage members, and the arrangement of their marriages. The new arenas offered by cities and large sanctuaries, however, opened vast and unprecedented scope for elite interaction over long distances. Large extra-urban cult-places, for instance, would hold periodic festivals that attracted elites from far and wide, across political and ethnic boundaries (see [Figure 2.8](#)). They would have clear ground rules forbidding violence and they would allow even enemy lineages to keep a line of communication open. While civic cults had a largely synergistic role with the other urban institutions, in that they reinforced citizen identity, legitimized rulers, guaranteed oaths, and much else, some cult-places of the same magnitude outside the cities could serve very different and sometimes even contrasting purposes.¹⁰¹ They would often have the function of consolidating political links between entire communities, as was the case of the so-called federal sanctuaries, such as that of the Latins on the Mons Albanus or of the Etruscans at the Fanum Voltumnae.¹⁰² There, at regular intervals, all the elites belonging to a group of cities or to a certain ethnic denomination would gather to celebrate rituals that inevitably created another layer of relationships besides those that they enjoyed in their communities of residence. The fact that quite a few of these large sanctuaries emphasized

¹⁰¹ De Grummond and Edlund-Berry 2011; Marroni 2012.

¹⁰² Mons Albanus, Afzelius 1942: 517–729; Ampolo 1993; Marroni 2012; for the Fanum Voltumnae, Stopponi 2011; Massa-Pairault 2016; overview in Bourdin 2012: 322–60.

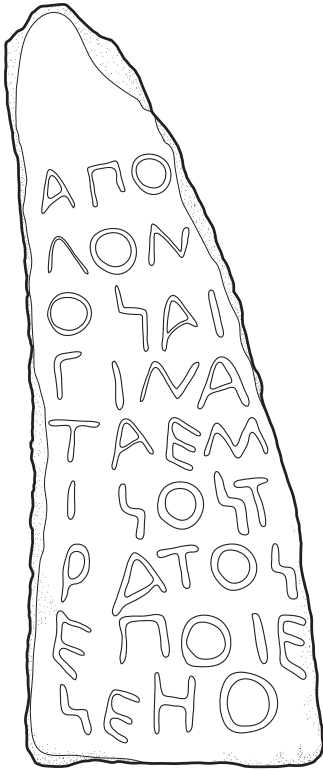


Figure 2.8 Stone anchor found at the sanctuary of Gravisca, a harbor site near Tarquinia. It bears a Greek inscription with the name of Sostratos as the dedicant. This is generally identified with the prominent sixth-century Greek merchant and traveler Sostratos of Aegina, whose successes were celebrated in Herodotus (Demetriou 2012: 65–67; Torelli 1971). Cases such as this exemplify the role that major cult-places, especially in commercial contexts, could play in creating political interaction across the entire Mediterranean (illustration by D. Diffendale).

ethnic cohesion, presumably building upon the similarities that existed between rituals performed in the same language, should not lead us to overestimate the importance of those identities in determining alliances and loyalty.¹⁰³ There were many other networks that connected elites across intersecting lines.

Some other sanctuaries, especially the extra-urban ones, often attracted elites as well as official delegations from far and wide, as is attested occasionally by signed dedications.¹⁰⁴ At one level, these cult-places would

¹⁰³ As has been done in a lot of the scholarship; e.g., Holloway 1994. Critique in Farney 2007; Warden 2013; Benelli 2018b.

¹⁰⁴ Demetriou 2012.

allow entire states to have diplomatic relations (both within and beyond their ethnic group), but, at another, they would offer opportunities for individual foreign lineages to create bonds with local ones. Thus sanctuaries could have considerable political significance, effectively becoming the physical space for friendship networks spanning across different states. A special category in this sense is represented by those cults connected with long-distance trading, which often had temples in harbor and market areas. Often dedicated to gods with a broad interethnic appeal, such as Hercules (equated with Phoenician Melkart), they facilitated the exchange of goods between merchants coming from different backgrounds but also the establishment of complex links between powerful clans and priestly groups belonging to communities halfway across the Mediterranean (see [Figure 2.9](#)).¹⁰⁵ What should be kept in mind is that this layer of interaction would allow, at least in theory, individual elite groups to build friendships and connections freely with outsiders, and even with enemies of their state of residence. Thus individual lineages and elite networks could weave in and out of their state-level system of treaties and alliances, according to the convenience of the moment, potentially creating an extremely complicated and heterogeneous web of ties at different tiers.

Connections of the kind described here were in all likelihood at work (and thus became visible for later historiography) when conflict flared up within individual cities. At those times, factions and lineages fighting each other and struggling for political dominance would naturally appeal to their friends in other states for that decisive support that could tilt the balance in their favor. In case of defeat or exile, on the other hand, friends outside the city could provide the losing faction with a refuge where they could repair and regroup. The paintings of a fourth-century BCE Etruscan tomb depict single combats (which probably took place two centuries before) between elite warriors from different cities.¹⁰⁶ These depictions certainly do not show a state-level war between two cities but rather episodes of the kind of coups, countercoups, conspiracies, and assassinations that had been a primary form of elite interaction for a long time (see [Figure 2.10](#)). In other words, it seems as if the ongoing instability and convulsions that characterized early urban political life were articulated along the lines of prevailing elite networks. Such factions in all likelihood shifted, split, and recombined all the time, as a result of the waxing and waning power of prominent elite networks.

¹⁰⁵ Rawlings and Bowden 2005; Malkin 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Buranelli 1987; Maras 2010; Massa-Pairault 2014.

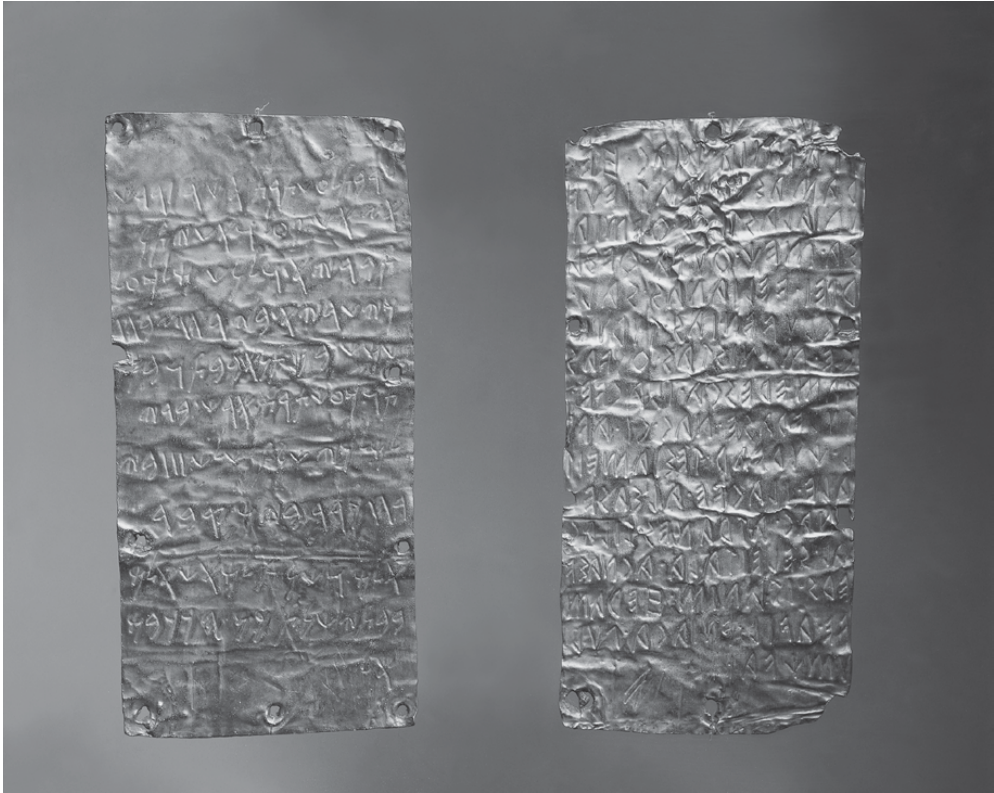


Figure 2.9 Inscriptions on gold leaf from the harbor sanctuary at Pyrgi, near Caere. One of the texts is in Etruscan (right) and one in Phoenician (left). Dated to the late sixth century BCE, they both record a dedication made by a ruler of Caere, Thefarie Velianas, to a local goddess (Bellelli and Xella 2016). The presence of a Phoenician version of the text is indicative of the long-distance connections that elites could have in this period (image courtesy of DeAgostini/Getty Images).

Power dynamics like these also allowed city rulers to interfere in the internal affairs of other cities, supporting a friendly faction there. This could extend the influence of the successful meddlers. There are various stories, supposedly relating events of the sixth century, that describe strategies of this kind being deployed. Examples include Porsenna, a king of Chiusi, who attempted unsuccessfully to exert control over Rome, or the Tarquin kings of Rome, who for a while managed to place one of theirs as a ruler in nearby Gabii.¹⁰⁷ While these stories cannot be taken at face value, they may well contain a glimpse of the political atmosphere that existed in

¹⁰⁷ Di Fazio 2000.



Figure 2.10 Wall paintings from the François tomb at Vulci. Created in the fourth century BCE, they portray, among other subjects, a series of combats or murders involving characters that are identifiable with sixth-century historical figures from various Etruscan cities and from Rome (Buranelli 1987; Massa-Pairault 2014). While the precise interpretation of the scenes is debated, they evoke a world of coups, political assassinations, and private wars (image courtesy of Bridgeman Images).

interstate politics at the time. An independent confirmation comes from recent archeological discoveries, which show that the early sixth-century royal imagery at Rome and Gabii was identical, strongly suggesting that related families were in power in the two cities.¹⁰⁸ Central Italian states were also frequently involved in open wars with each other. These conflicts were probably rooted in the traditional seasonal raiding warfare that had been going on since the Bronze Age. In the spring, after the ritual cleaning of the weapons, bands of young nonprofessional warriors led by aristocrats would set out in search for booty and adventure and return at the end of the summer, in time for the agricultural works of the fall. While undoubtedly significant clashes could occur as a result of these raids, they would not typically lead to the permanent subjection of one community to another.¹⁰⁹ Some land and other resources may have changed hands, possibly boundaries may have been moved slightly, but the basic constellation of small states was not affected in any serious way. The literary sources record the conquest and destruction by Rome of smaller nearby centers in the sixth century, like Crustumerium or Antemnae, but there is little firm evidence of what this would have involved for their occupants.¹¹⁰ In any case, there can be no doubt that none of the major central Italian cities lost their independence or ceased to exist until much later, after the beginning of the Roman conquest in the fourth century.

A possible consequence of early wars was that peripheral areas between two states sharing a boundary could be transferred from one to the other, as a result of open conflict or any other form of city interaction. Such was the case of Fidenae, for instance, a secondary urban center that went back and forth between Rome and Veii several times.¹¹¹ It should be remembered, however, that elite groups similar to those residing in the cities were in control in the countryside and that there is very little trace of a structural change as a result of warfare. It is quite likely that some local rural lineages could simply shift their loyalty from one center of power to another, without other major alterations of their arrangements. Alternatively, the elite group in charge could be replaced or otherwise tampered with, depending on how it stood with regard to the new central authority. It is in any case unlikely that before the conquest period there was any substantial change to the way in which these lands were controlled or that new administrative tools had been introduced by successful states.

¹⁰⁸ Fabbri 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Raaflaub 1996.

¹¹⁰ Quilici and Quilici Gigli 1980.

¹¹¹ See pp. 114–15.

Conclusions

When contemplating the sociopolitical landscape of central Italy between the ninth and the fifth centuries BCE, a tangled web of ties at different levels between lineages, factions, elite networks, and politics is visible. Given the scarcity of reliable evidence, one can only hope to delineate some of the essential traits of this world, taking the lineages as the main thread to follow through the evolution of the system. A key trait of the new urban entities is that they function as a new and more intensive arena for the kind of elite interaction that had been in place long before their coalescence. In this sense, they are weaker than the sum of their component parts. At the same time, however, the cities also progressively acquired a political agency of their own, but only inasmuch as they effectively represented the common interests of the groups they contained. When circumstances made it desirable, the members of the community could act in a coherent way and with a single purpose. An important example is provided by raiding warfare, where the spatial contiguity of the resources to be defended made natural allies of those who inhabited and exploited the same area. In the case of more politically significant conflicts, on the other hand, for instance over the control of a whole city, local factions may have found it expedient to activate their long-distance relationships to obtain aid for their struggle, thus effectively putting the loyalty to their social group ahead of that to the state in which they belonged. In a system of values of this kind, it would of course be preferable for a faction to be dominant in their community, even at the cost of a reduction of its autonomy or its resources, rather than being in a subordinate position in a more powerful state.

In archaic central Italian political interactions, the agency of states was always inextricably intertwined with that of factions and lineage groups. This is archeologically reflected in the tension between communal projects and private ones, which are constantly in competition over the same resources and spaces. Obviously, at any point in time, the action of the state as a whole resulted from the combination of the interests of the groups that composed it, but very often the dissenting minority would not abide by the majority's decision and would engage in their own policies, with little consideration of the state as an abstract object of loyalty. Starkly divergent elite priorities could paralyze cities for considerable lengths of time. On the whole, occurrences of pure civic politics, in which a state was at one with itself, must have been rare and would have coexisted side by side with private agendas. Those instances of single-mindedness can be explained as fortunate cases in which the elites sharing a city could agree on a strategy

that, in one way or another, benefited (or at least did not harm) a majority of them.

It should also be remembered that these early states were not composed exclusively of elite lineages and their dependents. There was a significant sector of the population that remained outside the traditional social system, such as long-distance traders, traveling craftsmen, nonelite refugees, and other itinerant characters.¹¹² In fact, it is arguable that, as a result of the emergence of states, the fraction of the people who were not tightly linked to the fortunes of an elite lineage continued to increase. This can be seen as an unintended consequence of the process, determined simply by the socioeconomic machinery set in motion by the new political entities. To those groups, one should add low-level government administrators and bureaucrats, temple dependents, and other urban specialists not directly relying on access to agricultural resources for their everyday subsistence. Inasmuch as it really was introduced, the rank-and-file army structure would have tended to join together horizontally individuals from different lineages but of similar rank, slowly eroding their traditional loyalties.¹¹³ These processes created a new and growing challenge for landed elites, but one that would not become unmanageable until much later.¹¹⁴

Even when interaction involved particularly cohesive states, it often tended to replicate elite lineage interaction in an expanded form. Gifts and embassies were exchanged, leading to the creation and reinforcement of alliances, which were extending the function of the reciprocal hospitality ties that had existed for centuries between lineages. Cities too negotiated issues of supremacy and hierarchy through influence, intimidation, and warfare, but the consequence of all this posturing and conflict typically resulted in increased influence rather than stable institutional control. There was never any attempt at incorporating another major polity, a notion which was just as foreign as that of merging two lineages together. Dominance was temporary and its impositions were limited to the seizing of resources, the exaction of tribute, the demand for hostages, and especially the placing of a friendly elite group in power. This last outcome was the only one that could have a significant long-term effect. It was, however, probably more frequently and easily achieved by means of influence and conspiracies rather than through military imposition, falling again essentially within the domain of elite lineage interaction.

¹¹² Bourdin 2012: 552–60.

¹¹³ Overview of the debate now in Armstrong 2016: 111–26; a comparable debate is also developing on the Greek side, e.g., Van Wees 2000; review in Kagan and Viggiano 2013.

¹¹⁴ See pp. 123, 246–47.

In conclusion, a reconsideration of central Italy before the Roman expansion from a forward-looking point of view seems to show very interesting elements, which tend to be lost when the later developments are taken for granted. The structures, processes, and tensions outlined here for the early part of the first millennium constitute a background against which the new developments needed to operate. Some cities, and Rome in particular, will often appear to be moving coherently in a given direction, but close observation will reveal similar levels of multitiered priorities and loyalties as had existed before the conquest. Public and private interests will often diverge, with the old world of competing factional lineages showing through. At the same time, building on such a long tradition of elite interaction, the expansionists will often be able to bring local aristocrats over to their side precisely by appealing to their private priorities, over ethnic and civic ones. Thus many of the elements that are often perceived by modern historians to be radical innovations of the age of conquest can instead be seen as refunctionalizations of cultural and behavioral material that had been around for centuries.¹¹⁵ In bringing the Roman Empire into existence, the inhabitants of central Italy (and later those of other coastal Mediterranean regions) were able to draw on a millennium-long experience of interaction and negotiation. The end product was something that had never been seen before, but many of the tools used to build it had been tested on a smaller scale for a very long time.

¹¹⁵ For the concept of refunctionalization, see Terrenato [1998a](#), with references.

3 | The Global Context of Roman Expansion: The Central Mediterranean between the Late Fifth and the Early Third Centuries BCE

Introduction

The Roman conquest was not born with Rome. For many centuries during the early first millennium, the city had, like all its peers in the region, limited itself to seasonal raiding warfare and to the occasional political meddling with the leadership of other cities. Despite the narratives about the conquests of the kings of Rome, there is no record or evidence of one major state permanently subjugating another before the fourth century. At most, some minor subsidiary centers such as Antemnae in Latium or Murlo in Etruria might have been brought more firmly under the control of the state in whose catchment they already were, or eliminated altogether.¹ But there was not much to foreshadow that the regional system would evolve toward a vast agglomeration of the existing city-based states, especially since their political structures were eminently unsuited to administer more than one primary urban center. There is no reason therefore to treat the relatively sudden appearance of expansionism in fourth-century central Italy as a natural development of the existing local political interplay. It represented instead a radical turning point in the history of the region, which has to be explained in the context of the changes that were taking place at the global scale, as well as the socioeconomic processes under way in the region.

Until very recently, scholarship has tended to shy away from any sustained investigation of the origins of Roman expansion in contrast with the period that preceded it.² The notion that there was a radical shift in Rome's foreign policies has not really been recognized for the difficult problem that it is. This is not surprising when one recalls the dominant theories that have been advanced to explain the imperialist drive of Rome. As a result, a crucial transformative period for the entire central Mediterranean has gone largely unremarked and not analyzed in all its far-reaching significance and complexity. There is no shortage, of course, of blow-by-blow, event-centered treatments of the period in question, but they typically do not look

¹ Torelli 1981b; Raaflaub 1996.

² Considerations of this kind however are clearly present in Flower 2010.

for any explicit causes that may have made Rome veer so much from the policies it had adopted for the first five hundred years or so of its existence.³ This is particularly the case for the supporters of aggressive imperialism, which in many ways appears today as the most widely accepted hypothesis. In this line of thinking, it is almost always postulated that Romans were by nature exceptionally inclined to assail their neighbors because of their upbringing, values, beliefs, political system, or desire for loot. These traits would always have been firmly rooted at the very core of Roman mentality; indeed they would be an integral part of the Roman psyche, thus rendering pointless any search for triggers that may have sparked the expansion.⁴ The occasional economic imperialists, who on the other hand see looting, confiscation, and entrepreneurship as the driving forces, have also generally looked at the internal material dynamics of Rome to explain its drive outward. In this view, growing Roman socioeconomic complexity, as well as technological and productive developments, would ultimately be responsible for the new course. While certainly less static than the aggressive theory, economic imperialism often fails to account for the broader context of the presumed intensification, since it remains essentially within a Romano-centric interpretative framework.

Defensive imperialists have been the only ones to look beyond Rome to explain its expansion. They did so, however, by frequently taking a purely event-based format: the threats successively posed by Latins, Samnites, or Carthaginians would be the goads that lead Roman armies further and further away from their homeland, but the motives behind the actions of Rome's enemies were not normally investigated any more than those of the Romans by aggressive imperialists. Just as Rome had existed for centuries without significant expansion, so had its immediate neighbors. If there really was a change in their attitude, their mutation requires an explanation just like Rome's does. In a way, defensive imperialists simply removed the question away from Rome, but they did not address its ultimate causation. They did embrace, in any case, a more expansive geopolitical horizon, realizing that tight interconnections existed between the different regions of the Mediterranean and that they played a significant role in the process.⁵

A significant break with the entire tradition, however, is perceptible in some recent works, where a more sustained attempt is made at providing

³ See pp. 109–10.

⁴ E.g., Eich and Eich 2005; Harris 2010.

⁵ For an overview on all this, with references, see pp. 24–26.

a broader context for the various phases and aspects of Roman history.⁶ It is not far-fetched, in this new perspective, to cast a wider gaze on the Mediterranean for factors that may have had a part in prompting and directing attempts at empire-building. If one looks at the long-term history of Rome across the entire first millennium BCE, it is evident that at some point Rome transitioned from being a small, relatively stable state to a rapidly expanding one. There was not simply a sharp increase in the rate and reach of the conquest, as would happen later, but rather the essential nature of the Roman polity was radically and fundamentally changed from one generation to the next, almost as if a series of massive genetic mutations had forever morphed one species into another of a very different kind.

In short, there is an attempt under way to break with the traditional unidirectional format in favor of a truly far-reaching contextualization of the origins of the conquest. Previous historiographical accounts have instead tended to follow the sequence of events from the perspective of one city, be it Rome or Syracuse, simply reserving a quick diversion to discuss the background of each new group being encountered by the expansion. In this, they have understandably adhered to the structure of many ancient historical works. Furthermore, the canonical modern subdivision between Greek and Roman history – rooted in Romantic concepts of ethnicity – has further discouraged holistic attempts. In other cases, such as those of Carthage or Tarquinia, the sheer absence of direct textual evidence has tended to relegate their histories to a limbo that is closer to later prehistory than to the classical world (see [Figure 3.1](#)). It should be noted in passing the sharp contrast of this with the art historical discourse, in which the diffusion of Hellenistic traits in high culture has been analyzed across different cultures many times.⁷ However, while the complex web of artistic evolution, imitation, and adaptation has been followed across the entire Mediterranean, less attention has so far been paid to the even more stunning coincidence that over a brief span of time an entire world of small states was mutated into one of territorial empires. Several players were at work in this direction across the whole central Mediterranean and they often deployed similar strategies at roughly the same time, despite their stark differences in terms of ethnic and linguistic traits, or of political and constitutional arrangements.

⁶ Most notably in Eckstein 2006, where the focus is on the evident “simultaneity” of different expansive projects in the Mediterranean during the second century BCE. Eckstein takes for granted, however, that all major states were seeking territorial expansion. Thus, it underplays the fact that many of these players had maintained a very different behavior in the previous centuries. See also Thorne 2013.

⁷ E.g., Stone 1971; Zanker 1976, and especially now Stewart 2014.

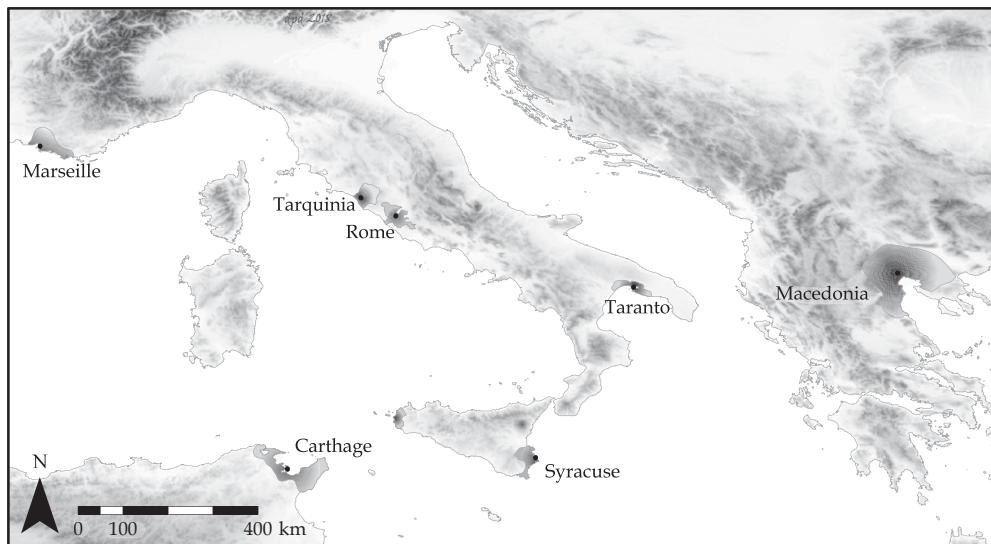


Figure 3.1 Map of the central Mediterranean indicating some of the main expanding states in the fourth and third centuries BCE (illustration by D. Diffendale).

In traditional Romano-centric accounts of the emergence of a global empire, issues of simultaneity have not figured prominently, and yet timing is clearly of the essence in explaining the inception of the expansion process. Rome was not the only state that underwent a radical transformation around the same time, so it is likely that there were common factors that influenced these concurrent changes. The actions and motivations of Rome's expansionist peers may contain important clues to a new understanding of what set the whole chain of events in motion. Those other polities that were not transformed in this way are also extremely relevant to a global, holistic reconstruction. While for a few states expansion became the highest priority, for the rest, arguably, these novelties posed a fresh challenge that required adjustment and repositioning on their part. While apparently very different, all these changes happened at the same time and should be seen as different facets of the same global phenomenon. At this point, no convincing explanation of Roman imperialism can abstract from a serious synchronic consideration of the concurrent developments in the central Mediterranean, to complement the diachronic look at the long-term components.

As already discussed, over the course of the first centuries of the first millennium BCE, a network of small, predominantly coastal states had emerged in large swaths of Greece, central and southern Italy, Sicily, north

Africa, and elsewhere, while along the eastern Mediterranean seaboard much older and much larger western Asian territorial empires had been thriving for a long time. Despite occasional (and largely failed) attempts by these empires to expand their reach further west into Europe, some sort of balance was maintained, at least down to 450 BCE. The small coastal states did not seek to establish permanent control of one another, and only a few new cities were being created (compared to the early part of the millennium). All the while, the Asian territorial empires were primarily concerned with their own internal power dynamics and successions, when they were not fighting each other. This relative equilibrium was completely and permanently unsettled from the late fifth century onward, in a process that essentially brought all the small states (as well as many nonurbanized areas, of course) within the same political game as the large empires and also led to the foundation of an unprecedented number of new cities.

In the Greek mainland, as is well known, the primary factor of unbalance was the consolidation of the Macedonian kingdom and its expansionist policy toward the small states to its south. This interrupted a long tradition of Greek cities constantly fighting each other and founding other cities, but never establishing long-lasting and direct administrative control of one city over another on a comparable scale. Perhaps significantly promoted by a more extensive emerging state that had not been traditionally centered on a single urban site, the Macedonian agenda in Greece forever altered the political geography of the region in the course of the fourth century, marking the sudden end of a long period of peer interactions between small states.⁸ It then directed itself east, toward a world that had already sustained thousands of years of territorial empires and whose nature, however, would not be as radically changed as Greece's, since it had experienced many bureaucratically complex empires before and had changed its leadership many times. After its conquest of Asia, Macedonian action might also have been poised to spread west, but there is strong evidence that well before this would happen, comparable processes were already at work in the central Mediterranean.

In the central Mediterranean, the independence of small states did not come to such an abrupt end as it had in the east, but it did begin to decline around the same time, eventually to die out in the course of the third century. For sure, there were neither regional powers akin to the Macedonian kingdom already in place nor powerful neighbors such as the Persian Empire to unbalance the situation so dramatically. Since the pace of the

⁸ Billows 1995; Worthington 2014.

process was much slower and more tentative, this actually permits a much closer examination of the forces and the phenomena that were at play. It goes without saying that the geographic space in question was heterogeneous in its landscapes human ecology, economy, culture, and ethnicity. And yet, even accounting for local variability, it is remarkable how many common elements at work can be identified across the whole region. Considering that they appeared around the same time across vast distances, they cannot be explained by processes happening at the local level, or in connection with events or conjunctures in individual cities; their causes must instead be sought at a much broader level.

At the macroscopic scale, what happened was that among the existing small states a few of them (which arguably had already been larger than their peers) began to expand little by little their area of control. This general trend took many different forms, depending on the local situation. Some commercial coastal cities, for instance, developed a much more direct and hands-on administration of their own hinterlands than they had before. These policies were often complemented by the creation of colonial foundations that were much more tightly connected with their mother-states than the Greek and Phoenician foundations had been in the earlier part of the millennium. Coastal areas characterized by pre-state societies suddenly evolved toward urbanization and became more directly involved in the global political interactions. At the same time, conflicts could result in a state becoming permanently allied with or controlled by another state, or, exceptionally, in the complete elimination of a major city. Through all these processes, a much more hierarchical and further-reaching urban system came into existence than had ever been the case in the centuries before. Networks of sociopolitical interaction were put in place and strengthened, and they progressively became responsible for decision-making that affected larger and larger areas of the central Mediterranean. Existing constitutional structures were sorely tested by the new functions that they had to perform within the vastly increased states. Less visibly, changes also took place in that majority of small states that were not attempting to expand but were still dealing with the new and destabilizing circumstances. Generally speaking, power relationships were being renegotiated everywhere and at all levels.

Given the vast historical scope of the transformation in question, it may be useful to select some examples of states for which there is more evidence of changes taking place, rather than attempting a general overview of the entire region. Syracuse, Carthage, Marseille, and Tarquinia represent an instructive cross-section of expanding cities that covers the entire geographic extension of the central Mediterranean and involves very different

ethnicities. The rationale for the choice is that they may allow for the detection of trends and strategies that also existed at the same time in Rome itself, providing a sense of possible causes and catalysts for the Roman expansion that may have been operating outside the internal dynamics of each individual city. Far-reaching and distinctive processes must have been at work to turn a relatively stable system of small states into an arena for competing expansionist projects, ultimately resulting in the creation of the most successful territorial empire ever to appear in the region. It should be kept in mind that other states too were expanding at the same time, sometimes on a smaller scale or simply less visibly in terms of our records.⁹ But in any case, the value of discussing these four examples is definitely not in their specific issues but rather in their manifesting symptoms of larger structural dynamics, ultimately responsible for the creation of a Mediterranean-wide empire.

Syracuse

Among the cases under discussion (and generally in the central Mediterranean), there is no doubt that the best and most reliable historical evidence is available for the Greek cities of southern Italy and Sicily. We know a considerable amount about political events and constitutional changes, as well as about wars and battles, from historical texts and a wealth of inscriptions. This makes the case of Syracuse in eastern Sicily particularly rich in detail and illustrative of some of the processes under way. The city had emerged, just as most other Greek colonies, during the great wave of urbanization of the early first millennium. It was, like many cities founded in this period, associated with an excellent harbor, and it soon started creating some independent colonies of its own along the coast and along important lines of communication.¹⁰ However, it was also endowed with a fertile hinterland that its inhabitants were clearly interested in exploiting. This resulted in the emergence of a landowning elite to whom social dependents were attached. These aristocrats had a dominant position in the political life of the city, perhaps more so than in other colonial Greek cities.¹¹ They were often at loggerheads with the trading and industrial

⁹ An obvious example is represented by Taranto, which in the fourth century tried a variety of strategies to assert its control in southeastern Italy; Brauer 1986; Lomas 1993: 39–57; Hyatt 2011.

¹⁰ Overview in Ampolo 2011; Evans 2016.

¹¹ De Angelis 2000.

elements in the city, from which some tyrants derived their support, as well as with the mercenary groups that were being employed from time to time.¹² In addition to the aristocratic factionalism that existed elsewhere, there were frequent revolutions, upheavals, and struggles resulting from the tensions between the different social groups in the city, and power changed hands very frequently. These complex internal events, together with the military expeditions and the regional alliances, have tended to receive the lion's share of attention in the modern research on the city.

Syracuse grew rapidly to become one of the greatest cities in the ancient world. It was the largest in the central Mediterranean in terms of built surface, with imposing public buildings and fortifications. By the fifth century, it also controlled one of the largest expanses of land in the region, thanks to a sustained push inland, sometimes at the expense of other neighboring cities. At that stage, most of the island was dotted with centers, including other Greek colonies, Punic cities, and indigenous settlements. All these central places possessed and exploited territories, with boundaries that pushed against each other, but, as was the case in central Italy, it was virtually unheard of to have one of these states completely absorbing another. One of the primary forms that interstate politics took before the late fifth century was interference in the political struggles of neighboring cities. The idea was to operate so that a friendly ruler, or even a relative, would come to power in another city. Thanks to the good quality of the historical records, we can reconstruct in considerable detail some of these mechanisms, incidentally lending a measure of credibility to the comparable narratives about coups and machinations between contemporary Etruscan and Latin states, such as the actions of the Tarquins spanning Tarquinia, Rome, and Gabii.¹³

For instance, in the early fifth century, the ruler of Agrigento – Theron – had managed to unsettle the ruler of Himera, which had allied itself with the Carthaginians, and to install his son as the leader of the city for a few years.¹⁴ An even more illustrative, and roughly contemporary, example is represented by the events surrounding the establishment of the Deinomenid dynasty in Syracuse. As a result of social unrest, a group of landed aristocrats was expelled from the city and sought refuge in nearby Gela, where the local ruler sided with them and reinstated them by force, becoming the new ruler of Syracuse. Instead of unifying the two states, he left the rule of his native Gela to his younger brother, who after his death succeeded

¹² Consolo Langher 1996: 257–87; Collin Bouffier 2010.

¹³ See pp. 67–69.

¹⁴ Luraghi 1994.

him in Syracuse.¹⁵ While the intent of these families to extend their power over more than one city is clear, it is very significant that no attempt was made to alter the political systems of the controlled cities, which remained formally independent. In fact, it would be completely misleading to conclude that lesser Gela had conquered mighty Syracuse. And indeed that the successful ruler of Gela, Gelon, was not operating on behalf of his city of origin is made clear by his abandoning its leadership for the much bigger job of ruling Syracuse. Just like with intermarriage and other diplomatic tools, elite lineages were constantly attempting to further their power and prestige in different states, a strategy that, when successful, allowed for very effective political and factional synergies. Because of their personal character, however, these concentrations of power were almost always short-lived and typically ended as soon as there was a counter coup, a death, or a falling out among the ruling elites.

The kind of political game that seems to characterize the entire central Mediterranean before the late fifth century was in many ways a direct emanation from the dynamics that had existed within and between elite lineages since the beginning of the millennium. Alliances, diplomatic marriages, coups, conspiracies, internecine strife, and military interventions could take place within one state as well as across several of them. In all this, citizenship, civic, and even ethnic allegiance often appear to have little or no real significance. Individual aristocrats, entire families, and parts thereof could easily relocate from one state to another with no challenge to their elite status. The case of Sicilian cities like Syracuse is probably unusual only in that we are well informed about it. It is likely that, were this kind of reliable evidence available for the other cities, comparable processes would be seen at work, crisscrossing the region with a thick web of elite links and movements in many different directions, which, however, never amounted to the permanent subjugation of one state to another.

A particular aspect of this international political scene was represented by the large-scale military clashes that would sometimes erupt between wide-reaching temporary alliances. The sometimes vague echoes of great battles, especially naval ones, have survived in the historical record, such as the one in the Mediterranean Sea off Corsica, fought in the in 530s between Phocaean Greeks and an alliance of Carthaginians and Etruscans. Syracuse specifically participated in a naval battle near Cuma in 473, where the Etruscans were defeated again.¹⁶ Conflicts such as these are probably

¹⁵ Mafodda 1996; Micciché 2010.

¹⁶ Bernardini, Spanu, and Zucca 2000; Millino 2013; Papalas 2013.

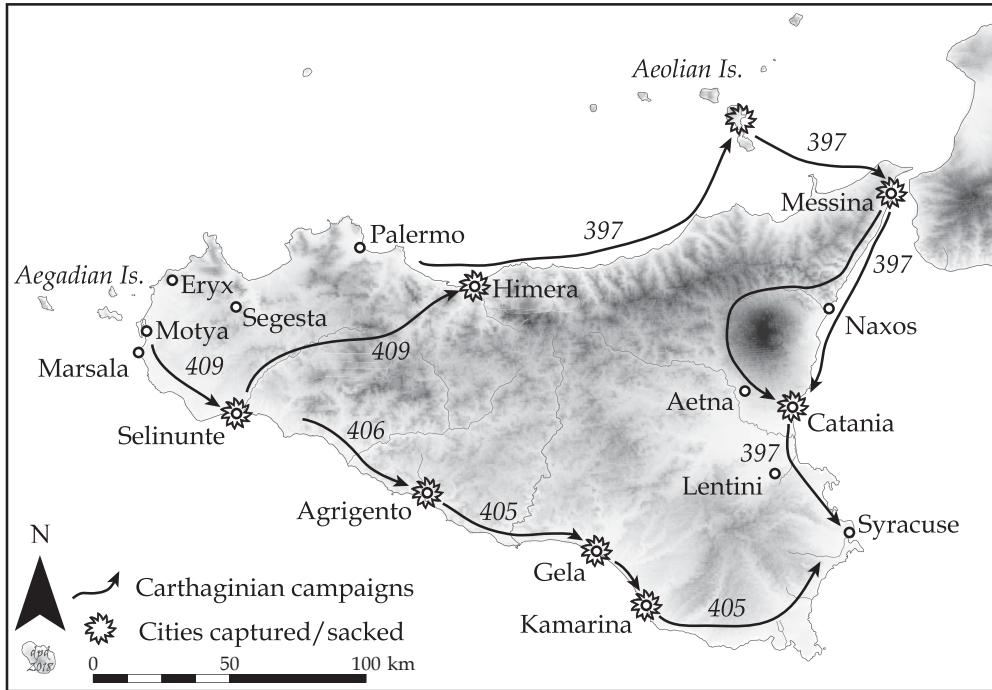


Figure 3.2 Map with the main campaigns and battles fought in Sicily between Carthage and Syracuse between the late fifth and the third centuries. These conflicts were on a much greater scale than anything that happened before. They ushered in a new era of territorial expansion aimed at the creation of large empires (illustration by D. Diffendale).

best interpreted as battles over spheres of political and commercial influence, rather than ones meant to gain territory that would be directly administered. They were often concluded by treaties that seem to establish zones of influence and access rather than actual territorial boundaries.¹⁷ Similar to these conflicts is, arguably, the great land battle of Himera, which in 480 pitted a large Carthaginian force against a coalition of Sicilian Greeks led by Syracuse (see [Figure 3.2](#)).¹⁸ While tension on the island between the two ethnic groups certainly had a long history, it was mostly connected with commercial access to harbors, as well as with factionalism within and between the cities, rather than with ethnic territorial states vying for empire-building.¹⁹ In this instance, the Carthaginian army had responded

¹⁷ See p. 59, footnote 89.

¹⁸ Consolo Langher 1997: 23–33; Trifirò 2014.

¹⁹ As often construed in traditional narratives; critique in Malkin 2001.

to a request for help from the rulers of Greek cities that were opposed to the powerful alliance between Syracuse and Agrigento, underscoring how these factions did not necessarily follow the ethnic boundaries.

A very tangible change in the trajectory of Syracuse (and of Sicily in general) took place at the end of the fifth century, when its political action veered in a radically different direction. In a way, the prime mover was still essentially the same as before, namely the incessant aristocratic ambition to acquire more power and prestige. And yet the form that this took and the tools being used were completely unprecedented, at least in their scale. Syracuse was in a period of prosperity, extending its reach into central Sicily. But the more important, qualitative difference is that at this point solutions were sought that enabled much more permanent forms of control over other states, as well as over nonurbanized areas. A strategy that was employed for this purpose was the forced relocation of entire smaller urban communities (or large portions thereof) to the expanding city. This had occasionally happened before,²⁰ but it hardly ever resulted in the complete demise of a major state. In the course of the fourth century, instead, several major Sicilian cities ceased to exist as such, at least for a period of time.²¹ In parallel with that, Syracusan rulers would more and more frequently reestablish abandoned cities, often settling in them displaced groups and mercenaries. Unfortunately, the ancient sources do not clarify how these cities were controlled from the center, other than through the deployment of a military garrison. But there are significant indicators that a broader administrative infrastructure was taking shape, changing the fundamental nature of the state of Syracuse. A clear indication of this is provided by the comprehensive monetary reform undertaken by the influential and long-lived tyrant Dionysius I between the end of the fifth and the early fourth centuries, which coincided with the cessation of local minting in cities now under Syracusan control, such as Gela, Messina, and Catania, which previously had their own coinage.²² Policies of this kind obviously curtailed the independence of these allied states, even if they were not directly administered from the center.

The reign of Dionysius I thus represented a major watershed in the history of Sicily. His propaganda also reflects a very different conception of the role and status of Syracuse on the Mediterranean scene. For his dealings

²⁰ For instance, when a part of the inhabitants of Gela were relocated to Syracuse in the early fifth century; Evans 2016: 156.

²¹ This was in part a result of the conflict with Carthage, see pp. 90–93.

²² Consolo Langher 1997: 119–31; De Angelis 2016: 275–79.

with his political partners on the Greek mainland, he adopted the unprecedented title of “archon of Sicily,” which combined a republican office title (archon) with a clear reference to territorial control over the entire island, rather than simply over the state of Syracuse.²³ This was a particularly revolutionary notion, which at the time would have sounded absolutely foreign to the political discourse in Greece. On the strength of military expeditions in southern Italy and elsewhere, he seems to have also entertained broader dreams of expansion, perhaps even styling himself as “dynast of Europe,” a move that may have had a direct influence on the political rhetoric of the Greek kings in the east a generation or two later.²⁴ Dionysius also appears to have had an impact on the industrial production of Syracuse, fostering higher productivity, standardization, and technological innovation.²⁵

The changes happening in Syracuse at this time were not exclusively the product of the individual agency of an unconventional ruler. After Dionysus’ death, his successors, despite their individual specificities, far from rolling back his radical innovations, consolidated and built upon them (see [Figure 3.3](#)). In the mid-fourth century, for instance, other influential rulers engaged in further reorganization and repopulation of dependent cities, as well as in the settlement of farmers in the countryside, clearly aiming at the creation of a more bureaucratized territorial state.²⁶ In the early third century, many of these policies were defined and formalized in a code that regulated taxation and administration, among other things. The law itself is lost to us, but it is telling that after the conquest it was subsumed by the Romans as a guideline for the provincial administration of the whole island.²⁷ The state ideology of course moved apace with the structural evolution. In the late fourth century, some Syracusan coins show the current ruler as the king of a territorial state, similar to the imagery that was being used at the same time by eastern monarchs who controlled territorial empires, like Alexander and his successors.²⁸

While the Syracusan case is rich in historical detail, it only illustrates a facet of the complex transformation that the central Mediterranean was undergoing at the time. Among other issues, the archeological evidence for this part of the island is not as rich as it is elsewhere, especially when it comes to surface surveys. What is available, such as the landscape around

²³ Sordi 1992.

²⁴ Zambon 2006; Péré-Noguès 2016.

²⁵ De Angelis 2016: 278–81.

²⁶ Sordi 1983; Galvagno 2000: 138–55; Smarczyk 2003; Günther 2012.

²⁷ This is the so-called *lex hieronica*; Lehmler 2005: 55–59.

²⁸ Zambon 2006.



Figure 3.3 Altar built by Hieron II of Syracuse in the mid-third century. It is a very elongated structure, almost 200 m long, in which a very large number of sacrifices could be carried out at the same time (Lehmler 2005: 135–45). While its precise function is debated, it clearly indicates the political ambitions of the Sicilian city (photo by D. Diffendale).

Gela, however, shows a marked increase in the density of the rural occupation beginning in the fourth century.²⁹ The appearance of large numbers of small farming settlements (compared to the previous phases) is a trend that has been verified for many regional contexts in this period. It definitely signals agricultural intensification and possibly social transformations as well. In the case of Syracuse, the land distribution policies undertaken by the government may have increased the impact of this global phenomenon. Archeological finds in this part of Sicily also suggest a significant expansion of craft production and long-distance marine trading, which again is in line with broader Mediterranean-wide trends.³⁰ All these changes in the material sphere evidently contribute to an increase in the levels of surplus, which in turn is necessary to fuel the vastly heightened political interaction and integration.

The case of Syracuse, in short, offers us some first important elements to characterize the global mechanism leading to the emergence of territorial empires in the region. Detailed textual narratives provide a precious

²⁹ Pilo 2006; Bergemann 2010.

³⁰ De Angelis 2016: 256–71.

glimpse of the actual political processes involved in the transformation of a city-based state into a territorial empire, as well as in the ideological shift that accompanied them. All this interacted with changes in land tenure patterns, nonagricultural production, and trade. Syracuse also presents some rather distinctive traits, compared to most of its contemporary peers. It seems to have been a state characterized by a particular amount of tension between landed lineages and the rest of the community. The former were not exclusively interested in landholding but also in the access to resources, areas of production, and markets. As a result, there were repeated periods of instability and revolutions between democratic, oligarchic, and tyrannical forms of government.³¹ While these frequent constitutional changes had a major significance for the internal political scene, however, they did not divert Syracuse from an expansionist path that was similar to those followed by other cities. In the case of Sicily, the close interaction between Carthage and Syracuse, which will be discussed below, may have been an additional catalyst for these new developments. The small states of the central Mediterranean had been neighbors and trade partners of each other and of territorial empires in the east for many centuries, apparently with only a moderate amount of unbalance. The reasons why this equilibrium was lost at the end of the fifth century still need to be investigated.

Carthage

The textual richness of the Greek record contrasts starkly with what is available for the other major expansionist power in Sicily, the city of Carthage. No Punic historical sources and only a few relevant inscriptions have survived, so most of the information comes from Greek and Latin texts, as well as from archeology. The available narratives are hazy, suggesting that Carthage was founded by Tyre in Lebanon in a time before the start of Greek colonization.³² For sure, the new city was independent from political control from the motherland and almost immediately set about creating its own colonies and commercial outposts in the central and western Mediterranean, often building on already existing Phoenician settlements and enclaves.³³ The participation and collaboration of local groups also

³¹ Thatcher 2012.

³² Archeologically, the earliest layers at Carthage date to the mid–late eighth century, Docter, et al. 2006, although C14 dates in the ninth century exist, Docter, et al. 2005.

³³ Aubet 2001: 353–55; Miles 2010; Dietler 2014b.

played a decisive role, as had been the case for Greek colonies.³⁴ The economy of Carthage, like that of many other Phoenician centers, was tightly linked to long-distance marine commerce, especially of prestige, labor-intensive, and exotic goods in return for raw materials and foodstuffs. Thanks to its prominent and central position along the African coast, the city was a crucial gateway in the longitudinal trade across the Mediterranean. A network of friendly settlements in northern Africa, western Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and southeastern Spain certainly was of great help in facilitating these exchanges. It is far less clear, given the available evidence, what might have been the administrative structure and the relationship with Carthage of places like Motya in Sicily, Leptis in Libya, or Tharros in Sardinia. Many of these places were much smaller than the average Mediterranean city and there is little to suggest that they were directly controlled by Carthage until much later.³⁵

What seems fairly certain is that Carthaginian colonies originally had virtually no interest in extending their control far inland. These settlements were typically located on small islands close the coast, promontories, or other isolated locations that could easily be defended through naval superiority. These sites often did not have easy access to vast expanses of arable land and their importance seems to have been predominantly commercial. Carthage itself, for centuries after its foundation, had made comparatively little investment in its own territory. There is a marked scarcity of subsidiary settlements or farms from the hinterland of Carthage before the late fifth century.³⁶ At this early stage, a far greater effort seems to have gone into long-range seafaring expeditions, which sometimes turned into wars. Narratives survive of Carthaginian navies clashing with Greek and Etruscan ones, naturally relying on their network of friendly outposts. Primarily at stake in these confrontations were spheres of influence and access to trade routes and resources. Indeed, precisely matters of this nature were regulated by the earliest treaty between Carthage and Rome. Formal diplomatic activity and ties of friendships, such as the one with the city of Caere, focused primarily on long-distance interactions.³⁷ Carthaginian elites roamed the entire Mediterranean, but they significantly made no attempt yet at conquering permanently other states, in line with the behavior of their peers elsewhere in the region.

³⁴ Osborne 1998; overview in Owen 2005.

³⁵ Whittaker 1978; Krings 2000; Aubet 2001: 231–43.

³⁶ Fentress and Docter 2008.

³⁷ For the treaty between Carthage and Rome and for the friendship with Caere attested by the tablets of Pyrgi, see pp. 59 and 67.

The Carthaginian commercial network in the western and central Mediterranean undoubtedly represented a more expansive and far-flung structure than any individual Greek or Etruscan city could boast. And yet it was nothing like a real territorial empire. The political form of the city itself, inasmuch as can be gleaned from the fragmentary evidence, was different from that of a highly centralized state.³⁸ Major trading houses shared the government of the city but were also free and able to engage in private commercial and even military endeavors, which could lead to the establishment of their own enclaves and outposts. A family resemblance with medieval Venice has been often evoked.³⁹ In that better-known historical context, individual merchant houses and the state collaborated and competed to create depots, found colonies, and even mount military expeditions.⁴⁰ While a full comparative study would be needed to substantiate the parallel, there is no doubt that Venice exemplifies how such a state entity could exist and be very successful on the Mediterranean scene.

Between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the fourth century, Carthage underwent profound political changes, beginning with its own constitution, which apparently evolved toward broader power-sharing.⁴¹ There was also a marked change in the way Carthage dealt with its own zones of influence, a phenomenon observed in a variety of geographic contexts. Archeologically, the hinterland of the city shows evident signs of a thorough reorganization. Several subsidiary towns were created and expanded along the coast and in inland areas (see [Figure 3.4](#)). They seem to have been administered directly from the capital; their function was to provide tighter control of the territory.⁴² Many new farmsteads dotted the countryside, beginning in the fourth century and increasing dramatically in the third, in line with the contemporary global shift toward agricultural intensification and landscape infill.⁴³ Similar trends are detectable in most other Punic contexts outside Africa. In southern Sardinia, for example, there is clear evidence of a spread of farming settlements inland from the commercial outposts along the coast.⁴⁴ Comparable trends are known from the Balearic Islands and from southeastern Spain, where consistently an expansion inland and a reorganization of the territory around each center

³⁸ Hoyos 2010: 20–62.

³⁹ Already by the Venetian doge Morosini in the 1600s, and later by Ruskin; Gleason 2000; Burke 2011.

⁴⁰ O'Connell 2013.

⁴¹ Lancel 1992: 114–20.

⁴² Fantar 1998; Ameling 2011.

⁴³ Fentress and Docter 2008; Docter 2009.

⁴⁴ Roppa 2014.



Figure 3.4 View of the city of Kerkouane, in northeastern Tunisia. While it has traces of earlier occupation, it was completely reorganized in the fourth century BCE, probably as a subsidiary center of Carthage (Fantar 1998). These actions are indicative of a far greater attention paid to the hinterland of the metropolis, in the context of the creation of a proper territorial state (image courtesy of DeAgostini/Getty Images).

has been noted.⁴⁵ It is not overly relevant to our argument whether these new farmsteads were inhabited by locals or by immigrants. Like all other Mediterranean colonizations, the Carthaginian one was also the result of interactions and conflicts between people from a variety of backgrounds. What matters here is the synchronous development of new and more intensive agricultural landscapes across the whole region.

The evolution of the political relationship of Carthaginian centers with their motherland is less clear, but among the scant textual materials there are hints of a more direct control. Elite funerary inscriptions from Sardinia, for instance, record for this period the presence of individuals who had received political honors in Carthage.⁴⁶ Tribute may also have been more often dictated by the alliance treaties that certainly linked the network together. Additionally, a progressive tightening of the commercial

⁴⁵ Ameling 1993; overview in van Dommelen, Gómez Bellard and Docter 2008.

⁴⁶ Garbini 1969; Miles 2010.

arrangements between the motherland and its colonies in the late fifth and fourth centuries has been surmised on the basis of ancient narratives, which also indicate that magistrates were occasionally sent from Carthage to western Sicily.⁴⁷ Further (and better attested) steps toward the creation of a centrally administered territorial empire were taken in the aftermath of the mid-third century First Punic War. The city was trying to regroup after a terrible war and its consequent defeat, which involved a substantial reduction of its zone of influence in the central Mediterranean. Carthaginian elites pursued the creation of a sort of client kingdom in southeastern Spain, complete with a newly founded capital. Hannibal's own lineage had a key role in creating and administering this new polity, underscoring once again the latitude of political and military action that great Carthaginian houses could enjoy. Garrisons were also more frequently deployed to the colonies and outposts and for longer periods, clearly suggesting that Carthage at that point considered them as strategic locations to be defended from encroachment by other expanding states.

It is arguable that another symptom of the changing atmosphere among the major political players in the central Mediterranean is the new form and scope taken by warfare, especially in the case of Sicily, about which we are more extensively and reliably informed. Carthage had always considered the colonies in the western part of the island an integral part of its primary zone of influence and had often been ready to send its navy to defend its trade network or to shore up friendly regimes there, while at the same time recruiting local warlords for its ends.⁴⁸ On the other hand, there was also a measure of coexistence and accommodation. There were Carthaginian trading enclaves in Greek cities like Agrigento and the boundaries of the Carthaginian area had not been radically altered for centuries. Things began to change, however, with the great battle of Himera in 480, in which a large Carthaginian force (including an unusually numerous land contingent) took part in defense of a Greek city and was defeated by a Syracuse-led coalition. This episode marked a transition away from commercial disputes toward true territorial struggles. The process evolved much further at the end of the fifth century, when an even bigger expedition landed in western Sicily. It rallied all the Carthaginian and philo-Carthaginian communities in an effort to gain political control over the whole island, as well as destroying Syracusan hegemony once and for all.⁴⁹ Since the attempt was

⁴⁷ Whittaker 1978; Hans 1983.

⁴⁸ Rawlings 2017.

⁴⁹ Barceló 1989; Anello 2008; Helas 2011.

unsuccessful, we cannot know what kind of administration, if any, would have been imposed on the island in case of victory. An important indication, however, is the elimination of cities of the caliber of Himera (in line with what the Syracusan rulers had been doing at their end of the island). It is also evident that the commander-in-chief of the expedition was, at least for the duration of the war, a supreme ruler of the Carthaginian dominions on the island on behalf of the government of the city, setting a new political precedent.

Greek writers naturally blamed the new developments in Sicily on Carthaginian greed. However, the historical timing of Carthage's expeditions should not necessarily lead to the conclusion that they were the prime mover for the centuries of struggles that ensued. In parallel with Carthage, Syracuse had been moving on a comparable path, which put the two expanding states on an inevitable collision course. Regardless of who acted first, both sides were for the first time explicitly exploring the revolutionary new concept of unifying the entire island. After centuries in which the balance of power between cities had not been significantly upset, both major players began pursuing similar strategies. They must have sensed in the new situation an opportunity to reorganize the whole of Sicily, perhaps along the same lines that were being implemented in the immediate hinterland of each city. This resulted in war goals that were far more ambitious than those of earlier naval clashes over zones of influence or of coups engineered in neighboring cities. In this new interaction, large land armies fought to obtain large and permanent territorial gains and in support of mutually incompatible expansionist projects. Syracuse and Carthage, despite being on different continents, were obviously keeping very close tabs on each other's moves, resulting in a steady escalation of their actions. Rulers in both states were also constantly trying to recruit more support for their policies among the elites of other states, often building on existing links of intermarriage and friendship.⁵⁰

The contours of the factional game being played in fourth- and third-century Sicily are of course connected with the political landscape on the island, where there was an unusual concentration of city-based states and other complex polities, including indigenous ones.⁵¹ In this sense, it is not surprising that some of the earliest recognizable expansionist action took

⁵⁰ Indicative is the case of the Carthaginian general Hamilcar, whose mother was from Syracuse and whose son took refuge in a Greek city; Hans 1983. For more examples of entanglements between Greeks and Carthaginians in Sicily, Prag 2010b.

⁵¹ Modrall 2011.

place in a context that was particularly conducive to the fusion of smaller states. However, it is instructive to consider how and where the frontlines were drawn and redrawn in this process. Much is made in the scholarship of the difference between Greek, Carthaginian, and indigenous polities, often portraying the conflict as a clash between antithetic nations. It is of course true that ethnic similarity was a banner that could conveniently be raised to rally certain fence-sitters in the struggle. It is important to remember though that both camps were crisscrossed by many factions, which would not shy away from reaching beyond ethnic lines, despite the central role that descent, however defined, played in both Phoenician and Greek culture.⁵² There are many examples of this permeability, from the mentioned appeal of Greek cities to Carthage to individual cases, like the presence of Greeks who fought on the Carthaginian side at Motya. Also instructive is the uprising of Syracusan commoners against their ruler Dionysius, when a Carthaginian army approached the outskirts of the city in the 390s, suggesting that subordinate classes could side with ethnic enemies without excessive qualms.⁵³

It should also be considered that the expanding states must have been aware that no territorial control of the entirety of Sicily would have been possible without coming to grips with the heterogeneous patchwork of cultures that composed it. Syracuse and Carthage would have had to incorporate a variety of ethnic groups if they really wanted to unify the island.⁵⁴ The creation of any kind of nation-state would have been both cognitively inconceivable and practically impossible. True ethnic cleansing, in Sicily as anywhere else in the central Mediterranean, would not have been a viable or desirable option, even assuming that anyone felt a need for it. For millennia, territorial empires in western Asia had always aggregated people of all kinds, and the Greek states that were their inheritors were following the same policies. There were however many ways of putting together a multiethnic territorial empire, and each solution had different pros and cons. It is argued here that the chances of long-term success for these new political entities would have been heavily influenced by how well the imperial policies were received by the incorporated communities. Seen in these terms, the two centuries of struggle for control of Sicily that would end with the Roman conquest of the island can be interpreted as a prolonged, harshly contested search for a balanced and effective solution to the problem of uniting so many and such diverse states and communities.

⁵² On kinship politics in Sicily, Prag 2010a; more generally on ethnicity, Hall 1997; Hall 2002.

⁵³ Alwine 2006: 19–27; Micciché 2008.

⁵⁴ A good perspective on this in Zambon 2008.

The intense political dialectics, of which warfare was only one of the facets, was also reflected in the different approaches that were applied in the dealings between states, between elites, and between social groups. The fine-grained historical records that have fortunately survived show the Syracusan leadership experimenting with a variety of constitutional, financial, and foreign policy arrangements, sometimes with rapid reversals. The actual players in this game were, as always, aristocrats trying to advance their own prestige and influence on their political scene. The scope and stakes of the game, however, were dramatically expanded in the changed circumstances. Elite families and factions could make instrumental use of the political machinery to achieve their goals, and if they were successful, this in turn would result in an expansion of the state they belonged to. Their allegiance, however, was not immutable, and they could even strike out on their own in private expansionistic enterprises. In the case of fourth- and third-century Sicily, Syracuse, and Carthage both in the end failed to find a stable solution to the riddle of incorporation, perhaps because of the ethnic overtones that were peculiar to both cultures, which had been exacerbated during the long centuries of conflict.

The other crucial lesson that can be learned from the combined observation of Syracuse and Carthage in this period is the global nature of the transformation. Across long distances, new territorial policies began to appear about the same time in disparate contexts. Parallel expansionist bids were set in motion and in full knowledge of other players' intentions. There was an evident escalation driven by the need to keep up and surpass rivals. Once one of the competitors made the leap, those who had not acquired the necessary critical mass risked losing even what they had before. Those who did not grow were absorbed. Once the process started, there was no safe way of staying at the margins of events. Even if the progression was an escalating one, its pace was far from gradual. The sudden and synchronic acceleration of this political game must have been triggered by new factors arising and affecting everyone.

Marseille

With the case of Marseille, we move to an altogether different situation, in what can be defined as a periphery of the urbanized Mediterranean world. This is not an instance of imperial expansion that is directly comparable to the other ones in this chapter, but it is significant here because some of the internal policies that were adopted illustrate common concerns.

It also offers insights into the kind of decision-making that major cities in the central Mediterranean were facing at this time. Founded at the end of the seventh century in southern France, Marseille was far from the bulk of Greek colonies but connected to other trading settlements along the coast. It had a few outposts and depots in strategic locations, sometimes in association with local communities. Indeed, its foundation narrative is based on a deal struck with a local king, who invited the Greek settlers in and arranged their marriages to women from his community. While certainly mythical, stories like these are revealing of the ethos and ethnic ideas of the aristocratic lineages in the city.⁵⁵

While the immediate agricultural hinterland of Marseille was best suited to wine and oil production, the city was not far from the very fertile lowlands of the Rhone valley. There is little evidence, however, of any encroachment there in the early period, when the city appears mostly dedicated to commerce and manufacture.⁵⁶ The location of Marseille offered great opportunities for trade and exchange. It allowed the city to act as a gateway between the Mediterranean marine trade toward Spain and the land routes into continental France. The city's reach must have extended far into the Tyrrhenian Sea, if its naval forces took a significant part in the great battles of the late sixth and early fifth centuries. Contacts with the rulers of Rome are also attested in this period.⁵⁷ While clearly interested in defending and expanding its zone of influence, Marseille apparently did not attempt to impact the interior affairs of other major cities or push for territorial expansion.

As with other states of the same kind, Marseille underwent a substantial transformation during the fourth century, which is even more remarkable when its previous circumstances are considered. An important component, for which we are particularly well informed thanks to recent high-quality archeological work, was once again the expansion and the sudden reorganization of the hinterland of the city in the direction of a proper and tighter territorial control. Survey evidence shows very clearly settlement trends that are similar to those that can only be gleaned in Sicily and Africa, namely a dramatic increase in the density of small agricultural sites dotting the arable lands near the city. This is in sharp contrast with the previous period, in which nucleated hilltop villages seemed to be the predominant settlement type.⁵⁸ Regardless of the social status and the ethnicity

⁵⁵ Hodge 1998; Dietler 2014a: 12–38; see also the papers in Bouffier and Garcia 2014.

⁵⁶ Bizot, et al. 2007; Antonelli 2008.

⁵⁷ DeWitt 1940; de Wever 1968.

⁵⁸ *Archaeomedes* 1998.

of the farmers in the new sites, which, as always, are not easy to determine, this concentration must signal a new interest in agricultural productivity, as well as the emergence of a different kind of rural society. In parallel with this trend, new subsidiary centers were created or renovated along the coast. In some cases, they built on existing settlements, such as Agde, while others were entirely new foundations, such as Nice and Antibes. These new centers were organized as cities but were almost certainly governed by magistrates sent from Marseille.⁵⁹ They undoubtedly demonstrate Marseille's establishment of closer political and military connections along the coast, but they also signaled the transition to a territorial state containing more than one urban center. The situation inland was more complicated, with a definite appearance of urban features, such as stone fortifications and orthogonal blocks, in existing Iron Age settlements.⁶⁰ Second-century Glanum, which is structured like a small Mediterranean sanctuary city in the Rhone valley, marks the expanding reach of the urban form. While this of course could have happened without direct input from Marseille, it was certainly a part of a transformation that morphed the urban system of the area from a single trading city to a constellation of interrelated centers.⁶¹

The form that the global move toward new political entities took in the case of Marseille is instructive. While by pre-fourth-century standards the city was not significantly disadvantaged compared to its peers, when territorial expansion became a desirable goal, certain strategic positions turned out to require particular strategies. Not having a thick cluster of neighboring states to incorporate into an imperial project apparently posed a problem. If, on the one hand, there were no immediately competing expansionist bids nearby to contend with, on the other, the scarcity of compatible political systems could curtail the fusion process. Since we observe expansion directing itself toward other states first, it would seem that nonstate societies, with their lesser degree of complexity and sophistication, presented greater obstacles when expanding states sought to incorporate them into an imperial project. The existence of mechanisms of this kind is essential to understanding contemporary Roman strategies. It suggests that expansion found a greater obstacle in incompatibility and disinclination to join a larger political formation than in a city's ability to mount greater resistance. In contrast with modern colonial ventures, the progress of these budding

⁵⁹ Bats 2004; Dietler 2014a: 130–46; 369.

⁶⁰ Arcelin 1992.

⁶¹ Tréziny 2006.

empires was facilitated by the presence of state-level organization and urbanization in the areas into which they intended to expand. Wherever these conditions were not present, where the existing settlement patterns were sparse or loosely organized, as was the case in northern Africa or in southern France, therein was a greater challenge. Where states and cities did not already exist, the most commonly adopted strategy was to promote and influence the emergence of such political structures. There was no need for mass movements of colonists to accomplish this goal. All that was required was to have new states in place, ruled, if possible, by friendly elites. Where, on the other hand, there was a long tradition of dense urbanism, such as in Sicily or central Italy, the expansion could proceed directly to the task of merging the existing states together. Seen in this perspective, state formation, colonial foundations, and conquests were all aspects of the same process of uniting territorial empires.

While for centuries parts of southern France had been evolving toward state organization, there was probably a limit to how much this process could advance in time for Marseille to establish itself as a credible regional power.⁶² At some point, it must have become clear to the elites of the city that an empire centered on it would not have the size required to survive in the quickly escalating Mediterranean-wide competition. Although not immediately threatened by any of the other expanding states and fully in control of its own area of influence, Marseille soon decided to join another imperialist bid, namely that of Rome. Possibly building on a long tradition of friendship (and sharing a conservative aristocratic ideology), the city negotiated a treaty of alliance with Rome no later than the early third century, creating a partnership that held firm for the entire duration of the Roman Empire (aside from picking the wrong side in a later civil war).⁶³ The case of Marseille is representative of what several other comparable states did in this period. Economically successful, they started expanding into the surrounding areas, incorporating other communities and promoting new urbanism. Their elites, however, soon realized that their chances of using their state of origin to further their goals were slim, when compared to those enjoyed by players of the caliber of Rome and Carthage, which had better starting advantages. In that situation, neutrality and independence, even if they appeared preferable to Romanist historians, were neither advantageous nor realistic options. The only possibilities were either to strike a mutually satisfactory deal with one of the big regional contenders

⁶² Woolf 1998.

⁶³ DeWitt 1940.

(and this is what Marseille and Naples did, as well as Syracuse later on) or try networking with large external forces (as Taranto did with the king of Epirus). Marseille could bring to the table valuable naval support to Rome's wars against Carthage and certainly shared in the benefits of the great defeats that the coalition of Campanians, Greeks, and Romans handed to the Carthaginians in the mid-third century.⁶⁴

While renouncing one's political autonomy may smack of failure, if measured on the city scale, when we see it through the eyes of the actual actors, it may instead appear as a successful outcome. Urban aristocrats, having built up large enough power bases beforehand, were able to negotiate much better terms of incorporation. Indeed, these large harbor cities (like Marseille, Naples, and Syracuse, but also Pozzuoli, Brindisi, and Delos), endowed with a considerable manufacturing and commercial component, would become the pillars of the global Roman economy. They remained home to prosperous elites that preserved their language and culture for many generations.⁶⁵ Tellingly, most of them survived the collapse of the Roman Empire and are bustling Mediterranean hubs today.

Tarquinia

The last example in this brief anthology of expanding states takes us to central Italy, the scene of Rome's earliest expansion. Tarquinia, unlike the cities considered so far, was not a colonial foundation but rather grew slowly, in parallel with other peer communities in the area and over the course of the early centuries of the first millennium, out of a cluster of Late Bronze Age settlements.⁶⁶ As is unfortunately always the case for Etruscan cities, the historical record is extremely scarce and heavily reliant on later Latin texts, complemented by Etruscan funerary inscriptions. A wealth of relevant archeological data, however, has been collected in recent decades and allows for some interesting observations on the development of what was arguably a very similar polity to Rome itself.⁶⁷ While the argument for Tarquinia's expansionism can only be circumstantial, it can illustrate some significant processes that are involved in the transition to a territorial empire, as well as provide a richer, more balanced background

⁶⁴ Bleckmann 2002.

⁶⁵ Loseby 1992.

⁶⁶ See pp. 35–37.

⁶⁷ Bonghi Jovino, Chiaramonte Treré, and Bedini 1997; Chiaramonte Treré, Bagnasco Gianni, and Bonghi Jovino 1999; Leighton 2004; Bonghi Jovino 2006.

to the early conquests of Rome by delineating a different picture of central Italy on the eve of its unification. Tarquinia's geographical position was enviable, close to the coast (where it had a harbor at Gravisca) and well connected to a densely packed network of peer cities, rather than being located on a thin coastal urbanized strip, like Carthage or Marseille. In this context, interstate ties expanding far inland were particularly strong, since central Italian elites knew each other very well and were connected at many different levels, from lineage friendship and intermarriage to alliances and leagues that joined entire polities together. Before the fourth century, some Tarquinian aristocrats had been embroiled in an attempt to interfere with the internal affairs of neighboring cities, a typical strategy for this period.⁶⁸

The importance of land-based resources was a distinctive trait of all of western central Italy, especially when compared to the commercial nature of the other contenders in the central Mediterranean. Elites at Tarquinia and elsewhere derived much of their wealth and prestige from agriculture, animal husbandry, and mining.⁶⁹ Thanks to the short distances between urban centers, a considerable proportion of the farmers could reside in cities and towns, while the others occupied villages in the countryside that often show evidence of having their own petty elites in residence. The often-mentioned transformation of the human landscape that started in the fourth century is particularly well attested, thanks to extensive field work, in central Italy generally and in the area of the southern Etruscan cities in particular. The diffusion of small farms throughout the arable parts of the region is a macroscopic trend that emerges again and again in settlement patterns reconstructed on the basis of surface surveys, complemented by a few full-site excavations and environmental observations.⁷⁰ This global phenomenon, which has been observed in every one of the case studies analyzed here, should perhaps be discussed in more detail in this specific instance (see [Figure 3.5](#)). The diffusion of small farms and settlements cannot be explained by any theory of demographic expansion (which is sometimes invoked as a possible cause), which could hardly have occurred everywhere and so suddenly. The related hypothesis that large new areas were first opened up for cultivation at this time is in contrast with the ubiquity of earlier farming villages in the region, as well as with the vegetation

⁶⁸ Even if it not accepted at face value, the narrative about the Tarquin kings of Rome coming from Tarquinia is indicative of the status of Tarquinia; Martínez-Pinna 1989; Ridgway 2006.

⁶⁹ Becker 2017.

⁷⁰ Potter 1979; Mandolesi and Pelfer 2002.

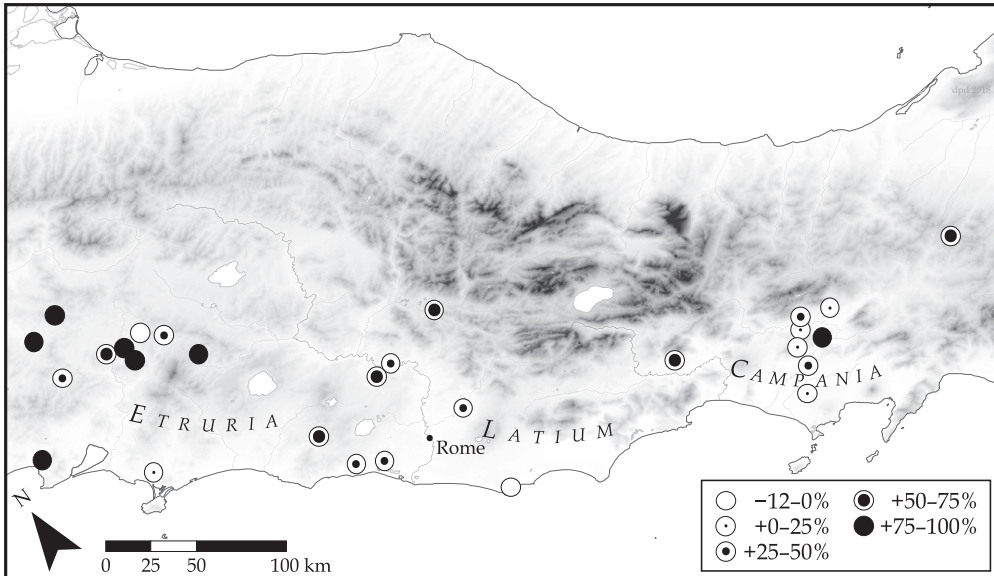


Figure 3.5 Map showing the areas in which an increase in the number of farm sites in fourth- and third-century Italy is attested (based on data provided by J. Troy Samuels 2019, whose ground-breaking dissertation work is proving the existence of this global trend; illustration by D. Diffendale).

record.⁷¹ There are instead two possible scenarios, which are not necessarily alternative to each other. Some of the farmers might have moved out of the agricultural villages to settle closer to the fields that they had always worked, while others may have always resided there, perhaps seasonally, and they suddenly became more archeologically visible because they built more permanent habitations and bought more goods, such as fine ceramic wares, that are easier to date precisely.⁷²

The diffusion of small independent farms in the fourth and third centuries has also been connected with social transformations that were happening at the time in Etruscan communities, traces of which would exist in the epigraphic and historical record. Some sort of serf class, which, according to some textual sources, would have characterized earlier Etruscan society, would now be acquiring more rights. These would include permanent ownership of the land they had been cultivating, which would in turn encourage multiyear agricultural practices, such as wine and oil

⁷¹ This is in contrast with the models envisioning vastly increasing rural population for this period, e.g., Attema, Burgers, and van Leusen 2010.

⁷² Cifani 2015; Stoddart 2017; on diagnosticity in field survey, Terrenato 2004b.

production. Their improved status would allow them to build more substantial farm buildings, whose traces we find. It would also embolden them to seek a renegotiation of the political order, occasionally ending in open revolts, which are attested in several Etruscan states for this period. It would be extremely interesting to know whether similar processes were also at work outside the Etruscan world, for instance in the other cases discussed so far.⁷³ For sure, the creation of these small farms everywhere in the central Mediterranean had far-reaching repercussions throughout the region. The presence of permanent small settlements in the countryside, while of course much more ergonomic and productive, left their occupants isolated and without defense against the raiding warfare that had been so common in the region for centuries. Furthermore, the spread of wine and oil production at these sites, progressively aimed at the long-distance trade, rendered them particularly vulnerable to the ravages of raiding warfare, since vines and olive trees would take many years to become productive again if they were damaged. These new conditions may have created the need for new arrangements that in one way or another would curb the violence that had prevailed in the countryside for centuries. In other words, the valuable small farms needed to be protected by the cities that relied on their surplus.

Certainly, Tarquinia shows indications of having promoted a tighter administration of its lands through the creation and reorganization of its network of subsidiary centers. Sites like Musarna show signs of expansion and integration within a centrally run administration.⁷⁴ In them, elites are archeologically more visible, and the same happens in Tarquinia itself. Lavish tombs appear in greater numbers as well as more massive temples, signaling that aristocrats were directing more of their resources to improve their political standing within the state. The rewards of the political competition in the city were much higher. At stake was not only local power but, most importantly, the ability for elites to pursue more grandiose aspirations in the rapidly evolving global scene.

There is an exceptional group of texts that give us a glimpse into the strategies adopted by some Tarquinian elites. The feats of the members of one lineage, the Spurinna, during the late fifth and fourth centuries, were eulogized much later in a few fragmentary Latin inscriptions (see [Figure 3.6](#)).⁷⁵ Despite the incompleteness of the texts, it can be reconstructed that over several generations this elite family was involved in complex

⁷³ There is a complex debate on the status of social subordinates in Etruria and elsewhere; Torelli 1987; Benelli 1996; Torelli 2014; Amann 2017.

⁷⁴ Andreau, Broise, and Jolivet 2002.

⁷⁵ Torelli 1975; Gabba 1979.

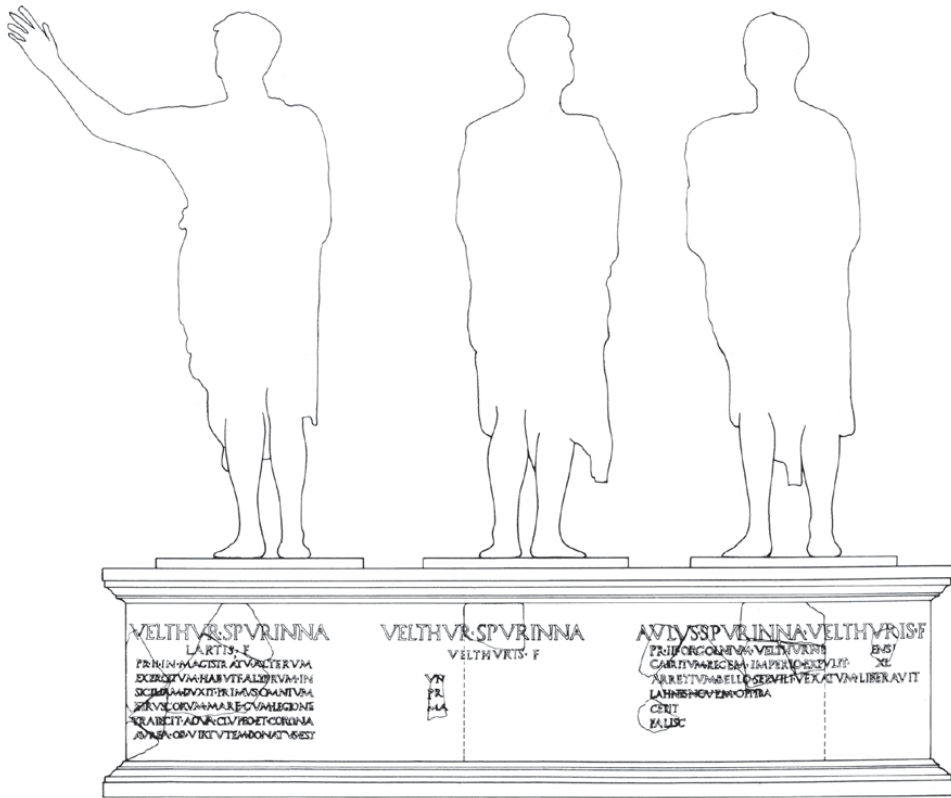


Figure 3.6 Reconstruction of the monument known as the Elogia Tarquiniensia. It was erected at Tarquinia in the first century CE by the powerful local family of the Spurrinae (Torelli 1975). It includes several inscriptions that celebrate the deeds of their ancestors during the late fifth and fourth centuries. While fragmentary, enough of these texts survive to provide a glimpse of the military and political involvements, as far as Sicily, of an elite family of the time of the conquest (image reprinted from Torelli, Mario 1975. *Elogia Tarquiniensia*. Firenze: Sansoni, courtesy of M. Torelli).

foreign political events, including a war in Sicily, a coup in neighboring Caere, and the repression of social unrest in Chiusi. Other Tarquinian noblemen of the period boast of a title that is connected to some kind of federal Etruscan office.⁷⁶ While all this tantalizes more than it satisfies, there is enough to conclude that some lineages at Tarquinia were busily engaged in new forms of long-distance political interaction. They were striving for a kind of power and reach that could never have been imagined before, for instance in the sixth century. In doing this, they were naturally building on

⁷⁶ Maggiani 1996.

a long tradition of regional elite connections and solidarity against social change. They were, at the same time, committed to maintaining the social order in other states in favor of landed aristocrats – a policy that would also be central to Roman action in the same period.

Tarquinius's history, despite being known only fragmentarily, illustrates another important component of the overall transformation. It indicates that the settlement pattern of reorganization and urban growth were directly connected with a new and different approach to external interaction. A larger political entity that provided more internal security and tighter social control could be a very effective answer to the challenges of the day. In the end, as happened with Marseille, Tarquinia's expansionist bid did not go anywhere in and of itself, but it probably gave its nobility a better bargaining position in joining Rome's bandwagon. Already by the end of the fourth century, Tarquinia had a solid treaty with Rome and later acquired citizenship rights. After the incorporation, we find local elites still in power and building great tombs. Later on some of them progressed to office and to senatorial rank in Rome.⁷⁷

Conclusions

A broad, synchronic reconsideration of the central Mediterranean story between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the third century reveals the existence of global trends that were concurrently at work throughout the region. The push toward larger territorial states was only one of many interrelated processes happening at the same time, and it was certainly not peculiar to Rome. Such a striking convergence in foreign politics requires a global explanation, rather than one based on local factors or stock ethnic traits, like Syracusan tyrannical dreams, Carthaginian commercial greed, or brave Roman militarism. Until recently, these developments have tended to be looked at in isolation, but it is clear that no serious attempt to determine the origins of any of these imperialisms can be abstracted from a study of their mutual influences, as well as from a careful consideration of how all the other relevant variables contributed to the final outcome: the emergence of a Mediterranean-wide empire. While a full interpretive model can only be attempted after the case of central Italy is discussed in some detail, several connected phenomena can already be highlighted.

⁷⁷ Torelli 1982b; Chiesa 2005.

The first macroscopic observation is that for the first time new ideas about what a state could be were introduced in many different contexts. While until then it had been implicitly accepted that each state would contain only one major urban center and control a relatively small amount of land around it, it is evident that at this point the revolutionary concept of a much larger empire, joining together a potentially unlimited number of urban centers, had been embraced by elites across the entire central Mediterranean.⁷⁸ The novel idea of utterly eliminating a neighboring major city and absorbing its population and territory also became a possible, if extreme, course of action that could be undertaken. This does not mean that all these new growing empires were being organized in the same way, but they all transcended, in one way or another, the boundaries of statehood that had been accepted without question for centuries. More forceful, more decisive, longer-term and longer-range military action was a significant component of the new strategies, but it was far from the only one. Another element was a much tighter control of the land belonging to the state by means of subsidiary settlements that were directly administered from the capital, which in turn led to the creation of more urban sites and the upgrade of already existing settlements. The different ways of controlling other cities included the appointment of governors, the promotion and empowerment of friendly local elites, the deployment of temporary or permanent garrisons, and the imposition of asymmetrical treaties, tribute, common currency, military service, and much else. While each expanding state adopted its own distinctive blend of policies, they all had the same goal and they all pushed the global political system in the same general direction.

Elites in widely different contexts must have somehow reckoned that the situation had matured for the foundation of new territorial empires, and many of them decided to try their hand at putting one together. They were probably well aware of each other's moves and their strategizing took into account a constantly evolving power balance between them. At a fundamental level, the expanding cities were competing to take on the prized role of being the capital of a new empire that was bound to happen in one way or another. They were putting in bids, as it were, to become the new center of gravity of the central Mediterranean. Each of them strove to be more successful militarily and diplomatically than the others, but it is arguable that a decisive aspect of the competition pertained to the different ways in which the conquered territories were dealt with and administered. Precisely because there were all these vying imperialist projects, those communities

⁷⁸ Morris 2013.

who were not trying to expand acquired a modicum of bargaining power, in that they could decide to side with (or in any case to put up less resistance against) the bid that they found less disagreeable. Many such communities, for instance in Sicily, must have discovered that there was little chance of watching the conflict between Carthage and Syracuse from the sidelines, but they still had the choice of siding with one of the two, perhaps trying to obtain some special consideration in return. This may seem a small freedom, but we should remember that the combined decisions of those communities ultimately determined which imperialist bid would prevail in the end. It was therefore essential for the expanding states to assess how their policies would be received in the communities that were being incorporated.

In our reconstructions, we tend to refer to Roman or Carthaginian imperialism, but this obfuscates the fact that the actual political actors in this complex phenomenon were not straightforward state governments. Rather, the real players operated at different levels, from that of interstate leagues and ethnic solidarities, to that of long-distance elite networks and political factions. But when we remember that the primary loyalty of the elites was to their family groups and that they could easily move from one state to another, it is clear that there was a much more fluid and fragmented dynamic to the process, one in which success would be measured more in terms of the advancement of one's own lineage or faction rather than the predominance of an impersonal political entity. Thus when winners and losers are called, it can be instructive to follow individual family biographies to determine how they were impacted by the political transformations in which they were involved.⁷⁹ At any rate, there can be no question that something had happened in the central Mediterranean that had triggered such radically new developments. Because of their simultaneity in different areas, it seems unlikely that internal factors within each expanding state had an exclusive, or even primary, role. The reaction to each other's expansionism of course was an important part of the process, but the classic model of defensive imperialism reveals all its shortcomings when seen in a global perspective. The role of prime mover can be passed around from the Romans to the Greeks, and from the Greeks to the Carthaginians (and back to the Romans by aggressive imperialists), but this does not ultimately help in determining which factors set the system in motion—what suddenly opened a window of opportunity to create territorial empires in the central Mediterranean.

⁷⁹ An approach that will be taken in [Chapter 5](#).

It is arguable that several interrelated processes in the socioeconomic sphere were concurrently at work, and that several thresholds were crossed around the same time. One such intersection was certainly represented by rural society and agricultural production. The global spread of individual isolated medium-sized farms, which happened right before the major imperialist push, would have been essential to generate more food surplus, as well as to increase wine and oil production. Although at present it is not easy to determine the precise causal relationship, the shift was almost certainly connected with changes in the social status of the farmers and in their economic capabilities. This in turn certainly prompted a higher level of social unrest and conflict in many polities (see [Figure 3.7](#)). Also certainly part of the same overall process is the growth of cities in general, where fortifications were often expanded and new temples built, and of elite spending in particular. Rural magnates appear to gravitate more toward the city, as the greater numbers of aristocratic tombs and residences that are visible everywhere attest. Industrial activities in the city increased sharply, with the mass production of fine pottery wares, metalwork, sculpture, and much else.⁸⁰ Long-distance trade, by sea and land, rose sharply, with increased circulation of prestige objects, but also of relatively more modest goods, from simple painted cups to glass beads. All this intensification certainly changed the social and economic makeup inside the cities, in some cases challenging the traditional predominance of landed aristocrats and established commercial houses. The increased, far-reaching commercial network also rendered a far greater fraction of the economy vulnerable to the action of pirates and robbers that had always preyed on the unregulated and undefended communication routes between states. The changes in land tenure patterns had a similar effect in exposing a far greater proportion of the farmers to brigandage and raiding warfare compared to when they had lived in larger fortified villages. Perhaps significantly, long-range marauding seems to have become more common too, with hordes of northern nonstate groups, like the Gauls, roaming far and wide throughout the region (see [Figure 3.8](#)).⁸¹ The growth in the use of mercenary troops by many states further compounded the vulnerability of the overall system, adding to the mix more armed bands, who often escaped the control of the states.⁸²

⁸⁰ Sewell 2010; Sewell 2016; for a case study of elite relationships to one city over the long term, Augenti and Terrenato 2000.

⁸¹ Williams 2001b; Williams 2001a; Mitchell 2007.

⁸² Especially in southern Italy, Sicily, and northern Africa; Tagliamonte 1994; Péré-Noguès 1999.



Figure 3.7 Cinerary urn from Chiusi. Dated to the second century BCE, it bears the name of the freedman of a powerful local family (Huntsman 2015). The frequent attestations of upwardly mobile characters in Etruscan and other central Italian states is evidence of the profound social change that characterized the period (image courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

While it is not easy to determine the precise way in which all these gears interlocked together, and which of the wheels, if any, got in motion first, it is hard to deny that, from the fourth century onward, they spurred on and fueled central Mediterranean imperialism. Territorial empires provided a functional answer to many of the problems posed by the ongoing transformations. They allowed a curbing of the raiding, piracy, and robbery that exacted too steep a price on agriculture and commerce, which in turn would free up more surplus needed to support a bulkier state bureaucracy. Empires also very significantly mitigated the impact of social unrest, joining ruling classes together to forge a much broader power base. The rising fortunes of newcomers who took advantage of the increased economic activities could

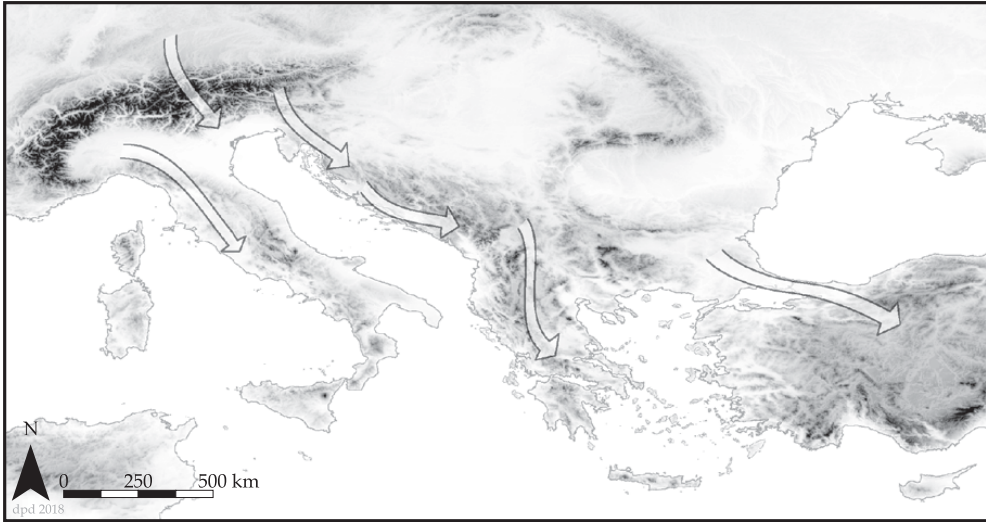


Figure 3.8 Map showing some of raids undertaken by Gauls in the fourth and third century BCE (Mitchell 2007). Their wide-ranging nature and their frequency represented a new element in the political landscape on the entire north Mediterranean shore (illustration by D. Diffendale).

be better kept in check if the traditional power-holders were all part of the same empire. Even where individual city governments teetered, there was a lot that an overarching government could do to stabilize political crises and guarantee the continuity of the established order. At another level, the presence of an imperial army reduced or eliminated the need for mercenaries and gave the urbanized communities an extra layer of protection against the unruliness of nonurban raiding groups.

The concurrent developments in the fourth- and third-century central Mediterranean offered an unprecedented opportunity to create a larger empire. More surplus and economies of scale could cover the costs of the unification, while aristocrats everywhere would have been inclined, more than ever before, to exchange a curtailment of their political independence in return for more safety and stability. Individual lineages could have dramatically enhanced their status, as long as they jumped on the correct bandwagon and maintained a solid power base locally. Moreover, elites all along the shores of the central Mediterranean, which had not previously had a prominent position vis-à-vis their peers in the east, must have suddenly realized that there was a chance to join forces and become the core of a global system that was coming together at that time, before this could happen somewhere else. And indeed, the following half millennium would

witness a colossal transfer of resources, money, raw materials, and people from the eastern and western Mediterranean to the center. While there may have been other factors at work in this macrohistoric process, it is very likely that territorial expansion and imperial organization gave to those who pulled it off successfully an important edge in making the most of the changed global circumstances.

When a broad enough view of Roman empire-building is taken, it is immediately apparent that the issue is not explaining why it happened. Regional conditions were ripe for the emergence of territorial empires, making the circumstances just right for the balance to change in one way or another. The real question is instead why Rome's bid to be at the head of a revolution, which was ripe to happen, was successful over other competing ones. At this time, Rome shared many of the same characteristics of the other major players on the central Mediterranean scene, in terms of size, political structure, and elite mentality. It was impacted by the same urban increase, rural infill, and industrial development as its competitors. Like Tarquinia, it was in the midst of a dense urban network and land-based resources played an important role among its elites. And yet something, other than luck, must have given Rome a decisive edge. The rest of this book tries to answer this fundamental question by zooming in on central and southern Italy.

4 | A Heterogeneous Conquest I: A Cross-Section of Polity Biographies and Types of Conflicts

Introduction

After having provided a broader chronological and geographic context for a reconsideration of Roman imperialism than is usually done, it is time to look at the process itself, with the aim of exploring the possibility of alternative reconstructions to those that have been current for many centuries. The focus is on what happened in central and part of southern Italy in the fourth and third centuries BCE. The point of departure corresponds to the earliest war that resulted in the permanent fusion of two major states. Expansionist warfare had arguably existed before, but it was much more limited in its scope and significantly did not cause the annexation or the destruction of any primary urban center. By the end of the period discussed here, Roman control of the central Mediterranean was uncontested and would not be challenged for another half millennium. Rome of course would go on expanding at a fast pace for another two centuries or more, but the first inception of this remarkable phenomenon is crucial to a full understanding of what triggered the process, of how it played out, of what made Rome's expansionist bid so successful, and of what were its consequences. This is the key moment when Rome mutated from relative territorial stability to dramatic expansion, so its study can throw light on the prime movers of this epoch-making transformation. Also, it is arguable that during this time there were more chances of the attempt failing than later, when Rome had already become the only superpower in the region.

An advantage of looking at Rome in this period is that, especially when compared to the other expanding states, there is a much larger quantity of information, even if such richness also has its downsides. Many ancient surviving texts provide information about specific events or periods.¹ A growing number of inscriptions offer tantalizing glimpses of individuals and families in action. Most importantly, down to 292 BCE, a continuous and relatively self-consistent historical narrative is preserved, those very same first ten books of Livy that would later be such an inspiration

¹ Overviews in Potter 1999; Bispham 2006b. Anthology of texts in Lomas 1996.

for Machiavelli's political thought. Since the days of Livy, the rise of Rome has been told countless times and with different slants, but some essential elements have almost always been taken for granted.

The prevailing format in modern historiography is in many ways the same that Livy adopted, namely a chronological account of the foreign affairs of Rome, with a heavy emphasis on the military campaigns and the foundation of colonies. Non-Romans appear almost only when they interact with the expanding city, and they quickly recede in the background as soon as the conquest proceeds elsewhere.² There are of course intrinsic constraints to the creation of alternative narrative structures, given the available information, but it can be an instructive exercise to begin piecing together at least some of the local histories, even with all their gaps and conjectures. Archeology, epigraphy, prosopography, and other datasets can supply some precious pieces of the puzzle, helping to move toward a reconstruction of the trajectory that each community followed in entering the new empire. The Roman textual material, with all the limitations and biases that it inevitably brings to the mix, necessarily remains at the core of our attempt, but it can be hoped that its reorganization along a different axis can shift the perspective in a less Romano-centric direction, in favor of a more multifaceted approach. Rather than adopting from the start an overarching theoretical model of imperialism, it is preferable here, at least as a preliminary heuristic step, to analyze the variability of the different local state biographies as they entered the empire. Such a bottom-up perspective reveals a surprising variability in the modes of conquest and incorporation of each community. Different preconditions, contingencies, and motivations are discernible across central Italy and they deeply influenced the actions of the locals as well as those of the Romans, who in the end cut a very different figure from the single-minded militarists of stock school textbooks.

It is also important to be willing to consider the role of actors other than abstract politics, if we want to appreciate in full the interplay that was taking place at different levels. For sure, our sources tend to privilege the public action of Roman officeholders ostensibly representing the interest of the state as a whole. Only rarely does something that exposes different kinds of motivations and objectives slip through, for instance in connection with the strong loyalty to lineages and other private social clusters. Political factionalism was directly connected with such ties, but it also intersected with rank and wealth differences in complex ways that can often only be intuited by us. As a result, some of the reconstructions in this chapter and in the next

² Among the many examples, Piganiol 1967; David 1994; Rosenstein 2012.

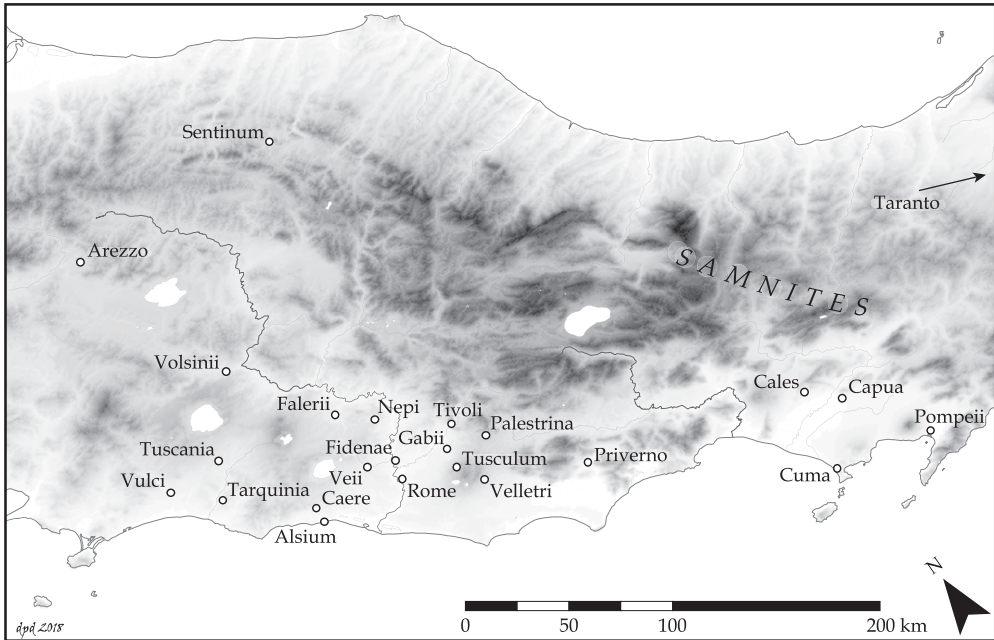


Figure 4.1 Map of Italy with the locations mentioned in [Chapter 4](#) (illustration by D. Diffendale).

are admittedly conjectural and based on anomalies in the record that would otherwise be hard to explain. Further consideration of the aftermath of the conquest and of the longer-term trajectory of the incorporated communities will hopefully lend additional support to the models presented here. If nothing else, anyway, it might be a useful experiment to test some long-held assumptions by standing them on their head. Playing devil's advocate and trying out “what if” scenarios are standard exploratory tools in historical research, but they have not been very frequently used in the vast majority of treatments of Roman imperialism.

The choice of cases of study is necessarily limited but it aims at being broadly representative of the spectrum of different possible scenarios (see [Figure 4.1](#)). There would definitely be a case to be made in favor of a thorough compilation for each individual polity in the area.³ As a first, rough approximation of that, some Etruscan, Latin, and Campanian city-based

³ Indeed it is arguable that the creation of as many city “biographies” as possible would be a step of fundamental importance for a new evaluation of the evidence relevant to the expansion process. Some first examples are Terrenato [1998b](#); Robinson [2013](#). A similar approach can be taken at the level of small regions, e.g., Sisani [2007](#); Roncaglia [2018](#). Less successfully, Haeussler [2013](#).

small states have been selected, together with what was probably a very different kind of community, that of the Samnites. These examples range widely not only in ethnic and geographic terms but also in the time of their conquest, the nature of their conflict with Rome, and their fate thereafter. It is essential to the argument being developed here to illustrate adequately such heterogeneity across several different dimensions, represented by the early and destructive incorporation of Veii, the pacific and gradual absorption of Caere, the complex machinations behind the Latin war, the global political struggle revolving around Capua at the end of the process, and the endless and hard-to-resolve struggle with the Samnites. Building on this limited sample, but with reference to many other individual instances, a typology and some common trends can be arrived at, hopefully offering a first approximation of an unconventional reassessment of Roman imperialism.

Veii

The city of Veii had emerged in parallel with all the other major peer urban centers in the region in the early first millennium.⁴ It was unusually close to Rome even by the standards of thickly urbanized western central Italy, and the Tiber may have been the original frontier between the territory of Veii, which was probably larger, and that of Rome. Before their great war at the end of the fifth century, the two bordering states had certainly been involved in frequent mutual raiding as well as in struggles to make limited territorial gains. The subsidiary center of Fidenae, in particular, which was located along the river valley, seems to have changed hands several times, with its inhabitants alternatively siding with one or the other of the two states.⁵ Also remarkable was the private war allegedly waged against the city by the Roman lineage of the Fabii (which would indeed go on to have a long-standing interest in Etruria throughout the conquest) in the early fifth century (see [Figure 4.2](#)).⁶ Veii would also have been politically involved in the affairs of its neighboring states, for instance supporting the claims of Etruscan kings at Rome, and perhaps through the connections with Caere of one of its kings, Lars Tolumnius.⁷ At the same time, complex cultural ties are also attested, for instance by the hiring of artists from Veii to create the

⁴ For an overview on Veii, Cascino, Di Giuseppe, and Patterson [2012](#); Zifferero [2017](#).

⁵ Forsythe [2005](#): 242–46; Barbina, et al. [2009](#).

⁶ Richard [1990](#); Richardson [2012](#).

⁷ Torelli [1981b](#); Migliorati [2003](#).

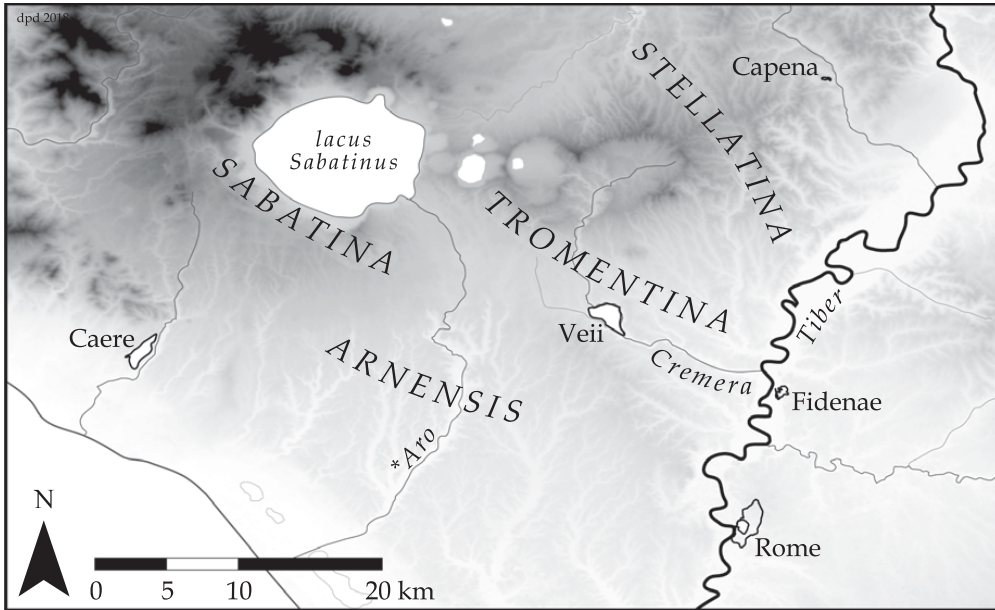


Figure 4.2 Map showing the location of Rome, Veii, and Fidenae. The river Cremera is the location of the battle that ended the private war that the Fabii waged against Veii in 477 BCE (Richard 1990). In italics are the four voting tribes that were instituted for the people of Veii who had been admitted into the Roman citizenship. They are significantly located in the areas of the Veii's original territory (illustration by D. Diffendale).

decoration for Rome's main temple.⁸ A road also probably connected the two cities together.

At the very end of the fifth century, however, the nature of the conflict seems to have radically changed. For the first time, a Roman army placed a major city under a multiyear siege and, after maintaining it for a number of years, eventually took the city, reportedly thanks to a mine. Such sustained assaults on a major urban center had been, until then, rare occurrences, if not completely unheard of.⁹ The ancient narratives report that army pay was introduced at that point, an innovation that, if it really did happen at this time, would go well with the transition from seasonal summer raiding warfare to the year-round campaigns that prolonged sieges would of course require.¹⁰ When Veii fell, the Roman army sacked the city and reportedly sold all the free population into slavery. Later events seem to indicate

⁸ Colonna 2008.

⁹ See discussion at pp. 67–69.

¹⁰ Hans 1983.

incontrovertibly that this marked the end of the existence of an urban center of any kind at Veii for many centuries, since the site was described as unoccupied and was used as a temporary camp by Roman troops on several occasions.¹¹ It was probably not entirely deserted, however, but it had been permanently deprived of its status as a city through the removal of its elites and the elimination of the key political structures.

The capture of Veii undoubtedly opened a new era in the history of Rome and of central Italy in general, marking the beginning of a transition from city-based small states to territorial empires. Fusing two major polities together, the resulting entity possessed a significant advantage in comparison with most other aspiring imperialists in the region. In much of the scholarship, the urban death of Veii is an episode that provides a convenient starting point for Roman imperialism and, at the same time, sets the tone for many modern narratives of it, emphasizing violence and complete political reorganization as the primary ingredients in the process. Veii's fate after its downfall, in a way, offers a paradigm of the devastating impact that the conquest is universally reputed to have had.¹² While there can be no doubt about the absolutely revolutionary character of the siege of Veii and its outcome, it should be said right away that this event is very far from being representative of the overall conquest and indeed represents an extreme outlier compared to the fate of the other small states that were absorbed in the Roman Empire. The complete annihilation of a major city had been, until then, an essentially inconceivable eventuality in central Italy, even after a shattering military defeat. The typical outcome would have been the installation in power of local elites friendly to the victors. Such had been the case when Anzio had surrendered to Rome in 468.¹³ It is therefore crucial to understand what was behind the very uncommon fate of Veii, without necessarily assuming that similar mechanisms were at work in all the other cases of incorporation.

A first element to consider is the close proximity of two large central places like Rome and Veii, as well as the fact that they shared control of the lower course of the Tiber, with the associated trade, tolls, and other benefits and revenues.¹⁴ Their protracted struggle over Fidenae, which

¹¹ Gowing 2008.

¹² E.g., Morley 2010: 16–17.

¹³ Bispham 2012; see pp. 80–82 for similar processes amongst Sicilian cities.

¹⁴ The Latin city of Gabii was at a similar distance from Rome as Veii. It was significantly smaller in size, however, and did not compete directly with Rome over the same resources. Even if it was never attacked by Rome, it was still abandoned by the first century BCE; Becker, Mogetta and Terrenato 2009.

occupied a strategic position further upstream, is a clear indication that the two states had been trying to gain exclusive access to a unique resource on the landscape, without succeeding in creating an easily defensible boundary between them. At the same time, some leaders in both states must have realized that a fusion would create an urban agglomeration in Italy that would have no rivals in terms of size and access to resources, in the same league with Syracuse itself.¹⁵ While we have very little evidence to fathom what Veii's foreign policies might have been, it was fundamentally true that the two cities stood in mutually exclusive locations and in each other's way on the path to a territorial state of any size. Merged together, instead, they could put in a very strong bid for the role of dominant regional power, both in terms of urban population and controlled territory. Despite the vagueness and unreliability of the textual sources for this period, there are several indications that would suggest that a fusion of the two states may be a better descriptor of what happened than the simple eradication of an entire community and that, in any case, help contextualize such an unusual event.¹⁶

The first element to consider is the presence of citizens of Veii (and of its allies from Capena and Falerii) who had gone over to the Roman side during the war. These defectors are unlikely to have been invented and similar occurrences would be very frequent in many of Rome's later conquests. We cannot of course precisely quantify their numbers, but they must have been very considerable if four new voting districts were created for them.¹⁷ Their existence seems to indicate the presence of a philo-Roman faction within the state of Veii, possibly including elites that were linked to some Roman lineages by friendship or intermarriage. They were rewarded with land and Roman citizenship a few years after the fall of their city, in a way that is not dissimilar in nature and scale to what had happened with the Claudii a century earlier. The presence of substantial numbers of people who had gone over to Rome may have been connected with the report that, around the time of the war, Veii had been taken over by a king, which some scholars interpret as a tyrannical coup.¹⁸ The radicalization of political life in the

¹⁵ Cornell 2000; Davies 2013.

¹⁶ An even more radical revision of the annexation of Veii is in Colivicchi forthcoming.

¹⁷ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 7 (=Liv. 6.4.4), where it is stated clearly that the confiscated lands were given to the local defectors, rather than to Roman colonists. This has however systematically been discounted by modern scholars simply because it did not fit prevailing models of Roman imperialism; e.g., Taylor 1960: 48.

¹⁸ The earlier ruler of Veii Tolumnius is generally interpreted as a tyrant; Di Fazio 2000; for the later, unnamed, king, see Becker 2013.

Etruscan city may well be reflected in the obscure mention of the impious behavior of its leaders at federal Etruscan rituals.¹⁹ The exile (voluntary or not) of opposing elites in such circumstances was a common occurrence and Rome would have been an obvious place for them to repair to and regroup. It is also very significant that other Etruscan states declined to come to the help of Veii, allegedly because of its being ruled by a tyrannical king. Since we know that other cities also had kings at this time, it is likely that the rulers of Veii had somehow fallen foul of the elite solidarity that existed by default in central Italy, and that contributed to seal the fate of their state.²⁰ Once the government had been toppled by the long siege, the exiled defectors might have hoped to return to power in the city, but they were instead made citizens of the larger Roman state that resulted from the fusion. While this was a catastrophe for the polity of Veii, it is quite possible that the exiled philo-Roman groups could have even profited from its demise, while their opponents may have taken the brunt of the defeat, as discussed above. Even in the case of the enslaved people, however, it should be remembered that in this period, quite a few of them, especially among the aristocracy, would have been able to redeem themselves (perhaps with the help of friends and relatives in other cities) and thus eventually acquire Roman citizenship too. Despite the extremely limited record, there may indeed be lineages originating from the disappeared city within the ranks of the Roman aristocracy.²¹

Seen in this perspective, even the extreme scenario offered by Veii, at least at some level, was the fusion of two states rather than the sheer elimination of a rival on the path to world domination. An important element in this sense is the ritual transfer of the defeated city's main state cult, dedicated to Juno Regina, to the Aventine in Rome. This would not become a routine occurrence in the rest of the conquest, and it is likely to have been undertaken because of the unusual case of Veii's incorporation.²² In light of the central role of these cults in providing a focus of loyalty and identity to the citizenship, a move of this kind makes particular sense if the two

¹⁹ For this and more generally for the whole episode in Livy, Oakley 2014.

²⁰ Some elements in Caere might even have been actively on Rome's side, Jones 1962: 122.

²¹ Torelli 1982b.

²² This ritual, known as *evocatio* (i.e., calling out), involved begging the deity to move to Rome. We are informed about it in reference to the patron goddess of Carthage, called to Rome when the city was destroyed in 146 BCE, which is the only other sure occasion in which this happened; Gustafsson 2000; Orlin 2010. The removal of the primary cult of a city (called the *poliadic* cult) was a radical act that presumably could only take place in cities that were ceasing to exist. The importation of other cults, like the one to the Magna Mater from Pessinus in Turkey, was a completely different process.

states were considered to have merged together and a significant proportion of Veii's original inhabitants now lived in Rome, rather than having been displaced elsewhere as chattel slaves. Another indication in this sense is the fate of Veii in the decades after the war. The textual narratives clearly imply that there was a tension in Rome concerning a resettlement of Veii, perhaps even an alternative to Rome itself. For instance, in the aftermath of the sack of Rome by the Gauls only a few years after the fall of Veii, there was apparently a faction that advocated moving the whole state to the site of Veii, claiming that Rome had been destroyed and defiled by the looters.²³ Similar debates happened also at other times, suggesting that the two citizenships had become one and that a significant group in it (perhaps including some of its old inhabitants?) would have preferred for the capital city to be in Veii. In the end, Veii continued to be used as a military staging area, a camp, and a place of temporary residence until, centuries later, it became a subsidiary center.²⁴

The fusion of more than one community, urban or not, into a larger state did exist and could happen both peacefully or violently. Cases of two or more polities merging together are well attested in contemporary Greece.²⁵ After all, many cities in the area had come together in a similar way some centuries before. Furthermore, it should also be remembered that, even after the formation of a new state, large groups of new citizens could be admitted, as the story of the polity-sized Claudii coming to Rome shows.²⁶ The only really unprecedented outcome for central Italy, in a reconstruction of this kind, would have been the dissolution of an existing major polity, a radically new concept that must have had strong supporters and opponents. The merger was undoubtedly a shocking event for many people, in both cities, but in the end it would create a much bigger state, still with just one city in it, but ideally poised for further expansion. There is no doubt that some, or even most, of the inhabitants of Veii lost out in the merger, just like the defectors would have if the siege had not been successful. The confiscation of the city's territory, in whichever form it took place, was a major change. It dispossessed a number of landowners and created vast expanses of what was called "public land," tracts that could be rented, sold, or allocated by the Roman government.²⁷ Through a process described in full elsewhere, this arrangement redistributed wealth in complex ways. It

²³ Jaeger 1997: 90–93.

²⁴ Liverani 1987.

²⁵ Demand 1990.

²⁶ See p. 56, footnote 81.

²⁷ Bernard 2016; for an overview of *ager publicus*, with a different interpretation, Roselaar 2010.

does not automatically follow, like has often been taken for granted, that all the land ended up in the hands of Roman colonists. While often interpreted in this way, the diffusion of small farms inferred from survey data is simply in line with a global phenomenon that was impacting the whole central Mediterranean (see [Figure 3.5](#)).²⁸ Large swaths of the land seem to have been under the control of aristocrats in Rome (including some from Veii), who may even have left some of the original farmers in place and extracted surplus from them.²⁹

While the conquest of Veii is often described in the simple, polarizing terms of Romans beginning their expansion by swallowing up their nearest neighbor, a broader contextualization of the event provides a different view. Two states that had been in conflict and negotiation for centuries over the control of the same fundamental resource, the Tiber, collapsed into one as a response to many changed circumstances. There was clearly a faction in Veii that favored the fusion, as there was probably one in Rome that opposed it. There may have even been some who liked the merger but would have preferred the capital to be at Veii. The undeniably prolonged and violent struggle opposed these groups, rather than simply the two states or, even less, the two ethnic groups. A determinant trigger may have been the fact that the leadership at Veii had somehow managed to alienate the sympathy of elites in other states, so that the rebalancing mechanism that normally would have prevented one state from becoming too powerful was not activated. This may have been the opportunity that the unification faction was waiting for, since it would allow it to strike without causing a widespread reaction. Elite networks centering in Rome were also always keen to maintain the established aristocratic social order against any kind of perceived drift toward more democratic power structures.³⁰

The incorporation of Veii was the result of an ad hoc, one-off action that was prompted by the unique spatial and historical relationship between this state and Rome, as well as by an unusual political conjuncture. It was a highly unusual and atypical form of imperialism that could only have worked in specific circumstances, and which was virtually never repeated. It can be seen as a preliminary step that would have been an essential prerequisite to any further expansion. For this reason, it is particularly misleading to use Veii as a paradigmatic example of how the Roman conquest worked. At any rate, it does not belie the basic model that is advanced here, that the

²⁸ See pp. 98–100.

²⁹ The rare instances of excavated farms in the land of Veii do not present significantly different traits after the conquest; Di Matteo 2005.

³⁰ See pp. 145–46.

struggles and the military clashes can be seen as part of the negotiation over the unification and its precise terms. In the specific case of Veii and Rome, this took the rare form of a complete fusion between the expanding state and its neighbor, and it would be unhelpful to extrapolate from that event a consistent Roman attitude toward conquered communities.

Caere

Caere was Veii's immediate neighbor to the north. It was a city of the same caliber and importance as a state and a trading center.³¹ Like Veii, it also had a long history of complex and close interactions with Rome. There have been conjectures that, in the late sixth century, the two cities had similar or perhaps even interrelated treaties with Carthage, based on the Punic inscriptions found in a temple at Caere's nearby port city (see Figure 2.9).³² This is further reinforced by historical narratives (strengthened by some epigraphic evidence) about elite individuals from the Etruscan city having connections with the kings of Rome as early as the sixth century.³³ When Rome began to expand, Caere seems to have carefully avoided any conflict with it, siding instead with its bid for dominance from an early stage. During the long war with Veii, Caere did not come to the rescue of the besieged city, despite their close contacts, and perhaps instead offered active support to the attacking state.³⁴ Once Veii was defeated and eliminated, the relationship between Rome and Caere, which at that point must have shared a frontier, became even tighter. During the sack of Rome by the Gauls, the holiest relics and the priests and priestesses of Rome were allegedly rushed to Caere (which was also fighting the Gauls) for safekeeping, so that rituals could continue uninterrupted. This is an act that implies deep mutual trust and that would often be recalled in subsequent diplomatic negotiations between the two states. The mention of a specific individual being entrusted with the transport might also hint at links existing at the private level between aristocrats in the two cities.³⁵ After all, the standard option for exiled gods was the same

³¹ Overview now in De Grummond and Pieraccini 2016; Zifferero 2017.

³² Scardigli 2011; Torelli 2016a.

³³ A debated narrative about two brothers from Caere (called Vibenna) that had a connection with the kings of Rome again hints at frequent horizontal exchanges at the elite level. Its historicity is supported by an inscription; Briquel 2009b; Maras 2010; Di Fazio 2017; Maras 2018.

³⁴ Torelli 1989.

³⁵ Livy and Luce 1998: 325 (=Liv. 5.40.9–10); on the Albinus who was involved, see Smith 2006: 355.

as for elite humans, i.e. repairing to a friendly house in another state. These dramatic events also highlighted the role that long-distance raiders played in cementing elite solidarities and in bringing together urban states that increasingly were experiencing the threat of these marauding groups. More generally, it is important to remember how exogenous factors like the interference of a foreign dynast or warlord, the collapse of an empire, and other events could have deeply impacted elite interactions inside Italy. Many of the new aristocratic strategies being deployed were adaptive responses to a changing global, as well as local, scene.

Certainly an element of friendship continued to characterize the relationships between Caere and Rome. Soon after the war, a new kind of political agreement was created between the two cities, forging a privileged relationship between their citizen bodies. While its precise nature and chronology are still actively debated, it seems most likely that it involved a mutual exchange of rights, such as those of commerce, inheritance, or relocation, but stopped short of political ones.³⁶ A key ideological plank in this process was the concept of public hospitality, which essentially retooled a form of elite friendship to include entire polities. Agreements of this kind were presumably sometimes included in the earlier commercial treaties, such as the one between Rome and Carthage, and would go on to play an important role, in various forms, for the remainder of the conquest.³⁷ They offered a path toward the consolidation of smaller states that was an alternative to the physical merging of cities, which obviously could not be done other than in exceptional cases.

Although there is a recorded war between Caere and Rome around the mid-fourth century, the two states entered into a long-lasting treaty afterwards that led to a long and almost uninterrupted peace. There may have been more conflict in the early third century, and confiscation of land is mentioned, but it is revealing that the family of the Genucii, which had tight local connections discussed below, appears to be deeply involved in the transition.³⁸ Significantly, full Roman citizenship was granted to the citizens of Caere soon after that.³⁹ Probably to be connected with the confiscations is the foundation in 247 of a small Roman colony at Alsium, a former port town controlled by Caere.⁴⁰ As argued elsewhere, however, the creation of

³⁶ Agreements of this kind may have been modeled on Greek concepts such as that of *isopolitia* (equal citizenship); Gawantka 1975.

³⁷ Sordi 1960; Cornell 1995: 321–22.

³⁸ Torelli 2016a.

³⁹ Torelli 2013.

⁴⁰ Another one might have been created at Pyrgi around the same time; Brandt 1985.

colonial settlements within the territory of allied cities does not have to be interpreted as a punishment, nor assumed to produce a wholesale transfer of land ownership from the locals to Roman newcomers.⁴¹ Colonies have long been considered blatant evidence of Roman domination in most modern scholarship, but recent, more nuanced work allows for a reinterpretation of the phenomenon that supports the idea that many local elites were involved in the overall process of integration.⁴² In the case of Caere, the foundation of Alsium, just like the conflicts with Rome recorded in the ancient historical sources, are arguably all part of the complex dialectics that would take place around the terms of the annexation, at the state level as well as at that of elite interactions. Like elite friendship, the links between entire states were not permanent, and they could be contested and renegotiated all the time, especially by different elites from those that had stipulated them.

Several texts preserve the memory of connections between aristocrats from Caere and their peers in other cities. For instance, at the end of the fourth century, members of the Fabii, the Roman lineage that always had the closest contacts with Etruria, were being educated in Caere and knew the Etruscan language.⁴³ Around the same time, we find a Plautia (a woman of a family that originated from Latium and had resettled to Rome, where it had reached the highest political offices), married into the powerful family of the Matuna in Caere.⁴⁴ Also significant is the case of the Clepsina, a noble lineage that was represented in various Etruscan states, such as Tarquinia, Tuscania, and Caere. In the early third century, we find two members of a high ranking family in Rome, the Genucii, adding the appellative Clepsina to their names, perhaps as a result of adoption or as a form of metronymic (which was common in Etruscan culture) (see [Figure 4.3](#)). Regardless of the details, this must indicate a link between elites in Rome and those in Caere, and indeed there is a highly unusual underground cultic building dedicated in Caere by C. Genucius Clepsina, who is generally assumed to have had an official role in the interactions and negotiations between Caere and Rome in the 270s BCE (see [Figure 4.4](#)).⁴⁵

Based on this evidence, as well as on the situation in other states, it does not seem much of a stretch to postulate the presence of one or more pro-Roman factions within Caere, composed of families that were linked by

⁴¹ See pp. 219–26.

⁴² Bradley 2006.

⁴³ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 209 (=Liv. 9.36.2–4); Wiseman 2008: 75; the Fabii were sporadically attested at Caere since the late seventh century; Ampolo 1976–77.

⁴⁴ Terrenato 2014.

⁴⁵ Torelli 2000; Colivicchi 2014; Colivicchi 2015.



Figure 4.3 Dedicatory inscription in the third-century complex of the Clepsina with the name of C. Genucius Clepsina, a Roman statesman with very strong connections to a major Etruscan lineage (Torelli 2014). These family ties must have had a role in shaping his political agenda in the region. Clepsina's munificence in Caere is evidence of the kind of actions that factional groups could deploy when communities were being integrated (image reprinted from Colivicchi et al. 2016, courtesy of the authors).

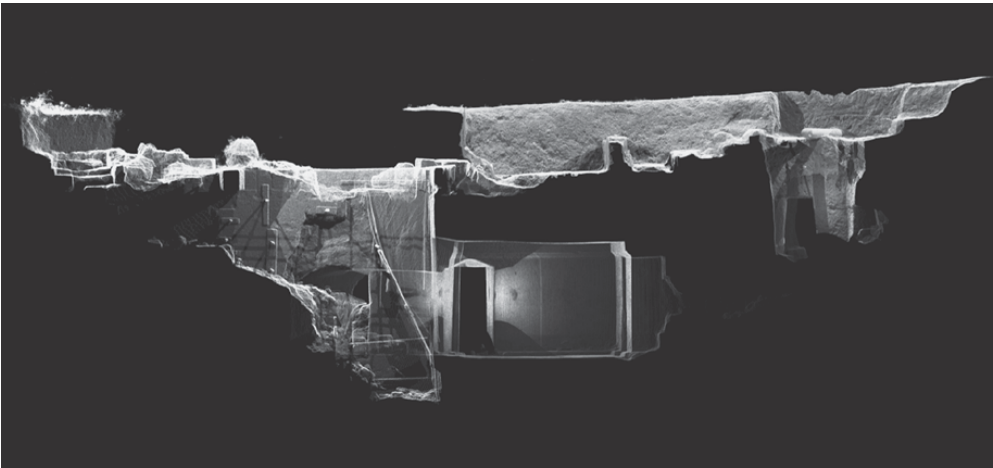


Figure 4.4 Cross-section of the underground complex of the Clepsina at Caere. Created in the third century BCE, it is interpreted as a sacred place where public ancestor cults were celebrated (courtesy of F. Colivicchi).

intermarriage or friendship with peer groups in Rome (and in other states). These people may well have supported closer integration with Rome, especially if their network of connections could succeed in controlling the process and in reaping its benefits. This is why so often members of families that already had connections with a certain area, like the Fabii with Etruria, would manage to be put in charge of the operations involving it. Their local knowledge would of course help them, as in the case of the Fabius who

was fluent in Etruscan and was campaigning in Etruria; but more importantly, they could activate their local contacts to steer events in the direction that was more productive for all the participants in the elite network. For the locals, having powerful Roman friends who helped make policies for their area of provenance would confer a crucial edge in the internal political game, making them ideal brokers between the expanding empire and their community of origin. Furthermore, the imperial system was set up so that it was relatively easy for these local groups to access it without losing any social standing, thus acquiring a chance of influencing directly the conduct of Roman affairs. There are several other families originating from Caere who show up in the Roman senate in the third and second centuries, demonstrating the concrete benefits that could be reaped from activating their elite contacts and siding with the right expansionist project.⁴⁶

Equating states like Caere or Rome to modern nations can make the real process of incorporation completely indecipherable. Ethnic and cultural differences notwithstanding, elites within these polities had a long tradition of horizontal mobility, intermarriage, and friendship, and they saw the state they belonged to primarily as a tool to advance their family agendas.⁴⁷ At any given time, within each polity there would always be struggling factions, one of which at least would be relying on their friends in Rome to turn things in a direction favorable to them. Going over to the Roman side with the help and mediation of one's contacts there may appear as a "betrayal" to modern eyes, but it would have made perfect sense in the aristocratic mentality of the time, therefore inducing no qualms when they took full advantage of any opportunities that the new situation presented.⁴⁸ They understood the potential of the new game and the risks connected with remaining outside it. They could advance their cause by tightening and making more permanent the links between communities, building on their private connections. Rome itself was of course far from monolithic: within it coexisted competing projects and priorities of expansion, which would be constantly advanced by different factions. Elite networks spanning different states could well help make a specific program prevail in Roman elections, thus closing the feedback loop that linked territorial expansion, local brokerage, and decision-making in Rome. In this perspective, it may be useful to consider the possibility that what is described in later historical narratives as the conquest of Caere was also a long-term process of

⁴⁶ Torelli 1982b.

⁴⁷ Patterson 2012.

⁴⁸ A useful overview on betrayal and desertion in the military context is in Wolff 2009.

interaction and negotiation between dominant elites in both states aiming at furthering their own private status. Military clashes could and did take place, but they are only one facet of the process, and often arguably not the most important one. It is quite possible that the violence during and after the conquest affected primarily those who opposed the incorporation or who perhaps would have preferred that it had played out differently and had been steered by different actors. The conflict is as much between Rome and another central Italian state as it is between trans-state factions with opposing agendas.

Of course, not all the people from Caere fared equally after the incorporation. Some land certainly changed hands as a result of the confiscations, and villas eventually appeared in the countryside, while some of the existing farms were abandoned.⁴⁹ New family names appeared in the epigraphic record while others disappeared. Over time, the city lost much of its relevance, although it was never abandoned like Veii. Traditional rock-cut tombs continued to be built down to the first century BCE, although generally on a smaller scale than in previous times, while monumental construction continued.⁵⁰ Local officials made reference to Etruscan glory.⁵¹ When these outcomes are considered, it may be tempting to object that, if some elites from Caere really saw the conquest as an opportunity for advancement, their reckoning was very near-sighted, and it did not pay in the long run. This only makes sense, however, if success is measured in reference to abstract political entities, rather than to actual actors. Even aside from the fact that any decision-making at any point in time cannot be based on the foresight of centuries, many of those who decided to side with Rome's expansion probably obtained precisely what they had hoped to achieve. In the perspective of weak state theory, the fact that their original political vehicle, the city of Caere, was eventually overshadowed and made politically irrelevant by the rise of Rome was not something that would necessarily affect their prospects in any particular way. It is arguable, especially if we consider how incomplete our record is, that a significant proportion of the elites from the vanished state had found new political tools and new arenas to deploy them.⁵²

While the observations conducted so far touch on a key mechanism that can potentially explain much in the Roman conquest, they of course apply preeminently to the landed elites that were at the top of the social hierarchy.

⁴⁹ Enei 1993; Pulcinelli 2016: 366–69.

⁵⁰ Colivicchi 2015.

⁵¹ Aigner-Foresti 2008.

⁵² See p. 48, footnote 64.

It is possible that many of their social dependents, both in the city and in the countryside, shared essentially in the fate of the aristocrats they were following.⁵³ Certainly, many of the small farms that existed before the conquest continued their existence long afterwards, with little indication of land changing hands as a result of the incorporation process. Another important group to consider are the independent craftsmen, traders, and shippers that would have been fairly numerous in a city like Caere, ever since the archaic period.⁵⁴ These social groups would have necessarily had a different take on the process of expansion, since typically they would have been excluded from the kind of elite negotiations that could slant the process. At the same time, they had a substantial stake in the state, and especially in its commercial networks, its trading outposts, and its sanctuaries. It was just as true for these agents as it was for the landed elites, however, that individual states were not much more than convenient frameworks and infrastructures to carry out their activities. Favorable conditions could be replicated elsewhere, making it unreasonable to expect more civic loyalty from landless (and often traveling) craftsmen and traders than from those who were mostly vested in real estate. The frequent relocation of these people had been going on for centuries and could only have been facilitated by the exchange of political rights between states, and their trade would have been too.

It should also be emphasized that larger territorial empires had a lot to offer to the manufacturing and commercial sectors. Anything that would curb piracy and brigandage, guarantee contracts, facilitate movement, and homogenize standards, measurements, and currencies would of course benefit production and exchange. The expanding Roman Empire would progressively offer all of these facilitations within the areas it controlled. In addition, a stronger political entity in central Italy could bargain for better terms in the Mediterranean-wide struggle for access to markets, ports, and zones of influence. The renewals of Rome's treaty with Carthage, for instance, are likely to have involved allied states like Caere, where the arts and crafts continued to be active for quite some time after the conquest. While they eventually declined, along with the rest of Caere, in central Italy as a whole, and in Etruria in particular, they went on flourishing for many centuries.⁵⁵ Workshops and distribution networks moved around the region enjoying the benefits of increased integration and standardization.

⁵³ This can for instance be argued in the case of Volterra; Terrenato 1998b.

⁵⁴ Nijboer 1998.

⁵⁵ Papi 2000; Roth 2007.

Similarly, long-distance trade of agricultural products like wine and oil also became more common in the countryside around Caere.⁵⁶

In conclusion, the trajectory of Caere provides us with an important counterpoint to the one of Veii. In the changed diplomatic environment of the fourth and third centuries, landed aristocrats on both sides could activate their private connections to guide a transition that did not have to be traumatic for the entire community. Some elites did profit from the new political opportunities offered by the expansion and were successful in the long run even if their state of origin was not. Traders and craftsmen, while they did not have much power to influence the process, also benefited from the creation of a larger and more integrated state. Indeed, they must have found ways to be adequately represented in Mediterranean-wide commercial negotiations even if they happened above their level. As exemplified by other Etruscan cities, however, the new empire also in many ways precluded radical social change, maintaining to a large extent the political and social predominance of landed lineages.⁵⁷

Capua

Turning to the area to the south of Rome, a state whose history exemplifies some important mechanisms in the early phases of the expansion is Capua. Once again, the city was a part of that first wave of urbanism whose origins went back to the early first millennium. Early tombs show the presence of a prosperous and well-connected aristocracy with similar traits to those in Latium and Etruria. The narratives that made it an Etruscan foundation of the early sixth century should probably not be taken literally, but they may be connected with elite mobility and interaction, which are also attested by the presence of inscriptions in Etruscan.⁵⁸ Local elements were certainly involved in the makeup of the state as well, and connections existed with nearby Cuma, the northernmost Greek colony along the coast of western Italy. By the fifth century, Capua had emerged as one of the larger and more powerful states in central Italy, with a very strong component of

⁵⁶ Tchernia 1986: 210.

⁵⁷ Paradoxically, it is precisely this possibly unexpected process that creates the most serious problems for traditionalist groups, both in Rome as in Caere. The machinery of the Empire, as it has been argued elsewhere (Terrenato 2005), ends up increasing the instability of the whole structure. But this is entirely another story that has little to do with the beginning of the expansion.

⁵⁸ Bellelli 2006: 110–22. More generally, Cerchiai 1995.

commercial and industrial activities, mainly in the metalworking sector. Like other states, it was actively involved in political games that spanned considerable distances. The surviving historical texts, while not necessarily completely reliable, indicate an involvement with the kings of Rome and with a tyrannical regime at Cuma in the late sixth and early fifth centuries. As a result, aristocrats from the Greek city would have repaired to Capua, plotting their counter coup, showing that ethnic differences did not pose much obstacle, especially at the elite level. Naval clashes between Greeks and Etruscans also took place off the coasts of Cuma.⁵⁹ Later in the fifth century, Samnites would have seized control of the city, after having been hired as laborers or mercenaries. While there is no doubt that elements speaking Oscan (the language of the Samnites) became part of the Capuan state at some point, the latter maintained its independence and later militarily resisted the Samnites. While ancient texts often describe such conflict in simple ethnic terms, it is important to remember that such identities were very fluid and permeable, especially at the elite level and in an area like Campania.⁶⁰

The scene of interstate relationships underwent a significant transformation in the fourth century, just as in other parts of the central Mediterranean. Instead of (or in addition to) the traditional struggle for political interference and commercial influence, coupled with the frequent raiding, the possibility of territorial expansion made its appearance. It could be argued, in this as in many other cases, that the existing network of interactions acquired, as it were, a new dimension and new goals. Alliances between states would become less volatile, and long-term arrangements would become more appropriate to the changed political environment. In the case of Capua, a major turning point took place in the mid-fourth century, when the state was apparently threatened by Samnite military action (despite the fact that Capua had allegedly already been conquered by the same people in the late fifth century) and appealed to Rome for help. The Roman senate replied that since they had an alliance with the Samnites, all they could try was persuasion to prevent a Samnite attack on Capua, but they could not fight them. Until this stage, these events were entirely within the sphere of the traditional political game. What the Capuans did after being initially denied assistance, however, was not. Performing a humble ritual surrender, they gave themselves up entirely to the Romans, in the

⁵⁹ Gallia 2007.

⁶⁰ The cultural hybridity at the elite level is best illustrated by the funerary record; Cornell and Lomas 1997; Cuzzo 2003; Bonghi Jovino 2013.

hope of creating a moral obligation to be protected, which the Romans ended up doing successfully.⁶¹

Capua's submissive move was paradoxically a bold and momentous one. While the practice, called *deditio* in Latin, had probably been done before, it was extremely rare, if not unprecedented, for an entire major state to resort to it. It was almost certainly a state-level version of a much older private form of behavior, which could happen on the battlefield as well as in civilian life (and which was at the root of the traditional forms of social dependency and patronage).⁶² Regulated by the concept of good faith, it created a permanent social bond between individuals or groups, in which those who surrendered put themselves at the mercy of those who received them "in good faith," while in turn the latter were committed to be lenient and paternalistic.⁶³ Applied to states, the difference (which must have been very clear to both parties) was that, compared to a simple alliance, it created a permanent, sacred, and asymmetric link between Rome and Capua. In effect, the two states, if not altogether merged, were certainly bonded together permanently. There was no undoing an unconditional surrender of this kind, so Capua would be forever submitted to Rome like a client to their patron. This would seem a rather harsh option for the Campanian city, especially if one considers that the alternative was to be raided and perhaps sacked by the Samnites but would be unlikely to involve any permanent loss of sovereignty, unless the attackers too were departing radically from their typical *modus operandi*. Capua's behavior could have been prompted by the realization that it was time to throw in the state's lot with one of the expanding new powers, as well as by a desire to put a stop to the resource drain created by the constant raiding carried out by nonurbanized peoples like the Samnites. There must have been some discussion of terms between Capua and Rome before the surrender and, in any case, the behavioral constraints that the religious act placed on the Romans should not be completely discounted. Perhaps significantly, the Capuans received a similar grant of Roman political rights as the one that Caere had obtained without having to surrender.⁶⁴

There is much that we cannot be sure about in this episode of fundamental importance for the early expansion of Rome, and the scholarly debate has disagreed on many individual points. A large, powerful, and

⁶¹ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 91–94 (Liv. 7.30–31); Hölkeskamp 2000.

⁶² Hölkeskamp 2004.

⁶³ For the concept of *fides*, Gruen 1982; see also pp. 189–90.

⁶⁴ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 130 (=Liv. 8.14.10).

cosmopolitan city like Capua, whose sophistication impressed and at the same time disturbed the Romans, would have had a good sense of the global political situation in central Italy and made its choices accordingly. It may have become clear to its elites that the space for independent neutrality was steadily shrinking as the advance of expansionist projects gathered momentum and the longer-range raiding by highlanders like the Samnites posed more and more of a problem to the productive structure of sedentary urbanized communities. Lacking the mass and the initiative to start its own empire and compete at the level of Carthage, Syracuse, or Taranto, Capua was probably forced to take sides.⁶⁵ In choosing Rome, it did not simply opt for the imperialist that was spatially closer but must have considered many other factors. To mention just one example, the choice would have had far-reaching consequences in terms of which markets and routes would be open to Capuan products, a consideration that must have been especially relevant in a community with a significant manufacturing and trading component. It is highly likely that, within the state, contrasting interests would collide at the moment of making such a far-reaching decision.

While we do not have direct evidence of factional tensions within Capua at the time of the surrender, subsequent events involving the city hint at an active political role of its elites. Despite having been supplicants to their Roman peers, they apparently did not abandon pursuing a variety of agendas. There is perhaps a hint of this in the fact that, the year after the surrender, the Roman garrison in Capua, allegedly corrupted by the pleasures of the rich city, conceived some kind of coup there, which was likely abetted by some of the local groups.⁶⁶ There were certainly elites in Capua that had good relationships with their peers in Rome, perhaps going back a century or two, as well as others that were opposed to their subordination to Rome. The latter must have had a hand in the defection of Capua only a few years later, in the course of a widespread war that opposed many Latin states, with Samnite help, to Rome. This conflict was clearly aimed at rebalancing power within the growing empire, rather than at breaking free from it, as is shown by the initial request that one of the two consuls be elected by the Latins.⁶⁷ After the defeat of the coalition, there were confiscations at Capua, but, like at Veii, there was a large group of Campanian and Latin knights who had stayed loyal and who were not punished.⁶⁸ It is not hard to see in some of them an aristocratic philo-Roman faction within the Capuan state

⁶⁵ Frederiksen 1984: 180–83.

⁶⁶ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 104–05 (=Liv. 7.38.5–10).

⁶⁷ Dipersia 1975.

⁶⁸ Frederiksen 1968.

that had been at odds with the anti-Roman one. It is obvious that in this new climate, very little room was left for neutrality among the elites. Those Capuans who had powerful friends in Rome could count on significant external support and could have been countered only by siding with other external factions in neighboring states. In the end, the philo-Romans fared better, but, significantly, Rome made its power structure more accessible to the whole polity with further grants of citizenship and political rights very soon after the conquest.

Toward the end of the fourth century, there was a request by the Capuans to Rome to give them laws and send a magistrate to govern them because of their internal discord. The reliability of this narrative has been questioned, but if it is accurate, it would represent another instance of local elites with powerful friends in Rome activating their contacts to control the local political game.⁶⁹ They could also, however, extend their reach to the Roman political machinery itself, which was slowly but surely becoming a new arena for urban elites everywhere in central Italy. Conspiracies were in fact reported only a few years later, in connection with a war against the Samnites which allegedly involved prominent men in Rome and attempts to control the elections.⁷⁰ Regardless of the details, events of this kind illustrate well the new dimension that factional conflict could take after states the size and complexity of Rome and Capua were joined together. Despite, or perhaps thanks to, its factional machinations, the city of Capua continued to prosper more than ever for the following century or so. Its manufacturers and traders evidently took full advantage of the opportunities offered by the new territorial state. Evidence of further integration can be seen in the issue of silver Roman coinage on Campanian standards, perhaps even produced in Capua itself in the late third century.⁷¹ For sure, the cavalry contingents provided by the city complemented nicely the Roman army, which was predominantly infantry-based.⁷²

At the end of the third century, during Hannibal's invasion of Italy, Capua was one of the few states that defected to the Carthaginian side, and by far the largest and most significant one to do so. It offered quarters and

⁶⁹ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 189 (=Liv. 9.20-5-6); Oakley 1998: 554-58.

⁷⁰ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 195 (=Liv. 9.25.3); Oakley 2005a: 304-06; the role played in all this by the Capuan family of the Calavii is highly illustrative of the agency that local elites could have; Briquel 2001.

⁷¹ Harl 1996: 24-27.

⁷² Frederiksen 1968. The alliance between Rome and the Campanian cities in this period is so tightly integrated that scholars such as Heurgon have spoken of a Romano-Campanian federal state; Heurgon 1969: 316-25. This however goes too far because Rome was involved as the central "hub" in many other alliances in a way that Capua was not.

help to Hannibal's troops, even without being actively threatened. Capua's isolated defection has sometimes been interpreted as a sign that Italians were eager to throw off Rome's rule as soon as its military power waned. And yet the motivations of the Capuans are not entirely self-evident. Not only had Capua benefited from its connection to Rome, maintaining its local autonomy and even meddling with the affairs of the capital, but a Roman defeat would have been unlikely to restore an independence that had been voluntarily surrendered. A Carthaginian victory would have simply brought about a new territorial empire in Italy on the same scale as the Roman one. At that late stage in the process of unification of the central Mediterranean, it would have been naïve to hope that an autonomous city-based state could be reestablished, even under a Carthaginian protectorate. Despite his declarations of Italian liberty, Hannibal was obviously trying to make Carthage the center of a large-scale empire that was in the cards anyway. Significantly, some narratives suggest that Capua, as an ally of the first hour, would have been made the capital of the Carthaginian province of Italy.⁷³ For some ambitious aristocrats in the city (perhaps those with the least connections with Roman ones), this must have been a realistic and seductive perspective that could potentially bring even greater benefits than those offered by the Roman Empire.⁷⁴ Others opposed such a risky course of action but were outmaneuvered and exiled. Similar factional tensions took place in many other polities, but, in most cases, the side that favored staying within the Roman alliance prevailed. Rather than being motivated by an anachronistic yearning for Capuan liberty, the actions of the city leadership make more sense as a part of the greater and long-term game of jockeying for power and centrality within the larger emerging political entities. Ethnic considerations of course had no weight either, given the considerable cultural distance with the Carthaginians. Simply, Italian elites were constantly evaluating possible courses of actions, trying to choose the one that seemed most advantageous for them.

It should not be a surprise that Capua was the one major state that "betrayed" Rome. It was a mighty city, possibly the biggest south of Rome at that point, and some of its aristocrats may have nurtured the dream of becoming a hegemonic regional power, thus effectively replacing Rome, even if until then they had used the Roman Empire as an arena for their political ambitions.⁷⁵ The temporary weakening of an imperial structure engaged in

⁷³ For a full discussion see the detailed treatment in Fronda 2007; Fronda 2010: 100–25; Kadleck 2010.

⁷⁴ Fronda 2010.

⁷⁵ Fronda 2007.

a struggle to the bitter end with a competitor offered a rare opportunity for a radical renegotiation of the terms of the inclusion. At times like these, the elites incorporated within the Roman state, even if they could not realistically hope for independence, could make significant decisions and their collective agency would determine the outcome of the global clash of empires. In the specific instance of the Hannibalic War, the policies adopted by the Roman political machinery for the previous two centuries received their ultimate test. If more than just the Capuans and a few others had decided that the Carthaginians were offering a better deal than the one that was in place, Hannibal's bandwagon might have been the one preferred by the majority of Italian aristocrats. This is also a sobering reminder of how territorial empires like these were kept together by volatile shared expectations much more than by deep loyalties, structural constraints, or military threat. Even at the height of their power and force, they were always vulnerable to being swayed by an alternative bid, by a reconfiguration of interstate and inter-elite links and networks. The endless series of conspiracies, coups, usurpations, secessions, and civil wars that will characterize the Roman Empire for the following half millennium finds its roots in the very way in which it was put together.

In the end, as is well known, the Roman alliance held up rather beautifully in the face of crushing military defeats, indicating that, at least in that circumstance, the majority of Italian elites preferred to stay with the arrangements they had rather than taking a chance with those the Carthaginians could offer. This was the crucial deciding process that kept Rome's bid alive. Needless to say, once the crisis was over, the prevailing side took a very dim view of those who had defected to the losing one. More than any abstract breach of loyalty, successful empires needed to deter side-swapping as much as possible, while at the same time not losing the consensus that was at the root of the alliance. In the case of Capua, the punishment was very harsh (as well as instructive for us): the state was entirely dissolved and kept that way for decades, and land was confiscated.⁷⁶ More than mass killings or enslavements, these sanctions were clearly aimed at the aristocrats who had made the decisions, depriving them of their land and of their primary political tool. As was frequently the case, however, the philo-Roman faction was spared and indeed probably rewarded. Again, there were Capuan knights who had fought with Rome, who were made citizens of a nearby city.⁷⁷ The latter provision was essential so that they

⁷⁶ Manzo 2002.

⁷⁷ Frederiksen 1984: 244–50.

would still have access to a polity in which to play an analogous political role to the one they had in Capua. Similarly, a prominent philo-Roman lineage from Capua, which had gone into exile during the defection, relocated elsewhere after the dissolution of their city of origin.⁷⁸ Such elite mobility, which continued from many centuries before, emphasized once more the largely instrumental interest that elites had in the states that they inhabited at any given time.

The site of Capua, despite its loss of status, was not completely abandoned, and in the course of the second century an urban government was reconstituted. The unfortunate episode forgotten, the city prospered over the long term.⁷⁹ Its cavalry continued to serve with the Roman army, which showed little diffidence about their trustworthiness. The treatment of Capua, together with that of Veii and Falerii, are frequently highlighted in the modern scholarship to argue for the harsh brutality of Rome's imperialism. They were, however, rare cases that were largely determined by unique circumstances and should not be taken as paradigms for the entire process.⁸⁰ There can be no doubt that those elites in Capua that had sided against Rome were indeed severely punished, but only as a result of an exceptional transgression. This resulted in the survival and advancement of only those local aristocrats who had friends in Rome, an outcome perhaps more radical but not altogether at odds with what happened in a milder form in most other incorporated communities in central Italy.

Samnites

Within the range of variable responses enacted by the communities that were dealing with Rome's expansion, the case of the Samnites must be considered, as it is representative of an important part of the overall process. Unlike all the examples discussed so far, it does not involve one of the small city-based states that emerged in the early first millennium along the western coast of Italy. The ethnic denomination of Samnites indicated, though not in a very consistent way, a group of people living in a large area along the hilly backbone of central and southern Italy. They were further subdivided in a number of smaller ethnic groups, but they more or less shared a common language – Oscan – which was also present

⁷⁸ See pp. 189–91.

⁷⁹ Frederiksen 1959.

⁸⁰ Similarly to what has been argued for Veii above. Together with Falerii and Volsinii, Capua and Veii are used as paradigmatic examples of Roman harshness; e.g., Morel 1989.

elsewhere, however, and had many variants and dialects.⁸¹ Sizable expanses of arable land were relatively scarce in this hilly landscape, and mobile pastoralism played a considerable role in the subsistence of the Samnites.⁸² Manufacturing activities were modest in volume, and trade centered on the acquisition of exotic prestige items for the elites. There were no cities, or even other kinds of settlements of comparable size, in the Samnite areas until long after the conquest. Sanctuary sites of considerable wealth and architectural sophistication, however, dotted the countryside, sometimes in proximity to the fortified villages in which most of the population traditionally lived (see [Figure 4.5](#)).⁸³ These cult-places undoubtedly had an important federal role in creating a connection between these scattered groups and in forging a common identity. While the Samnites were often portrayed by Roman sources as being loosely organized and unruly, there is evidence of political complexity and coordination in their affairs that went far beyond the boundaries of each individual settlement. Office holders were elected, and they occasionally appear to have been in control of vast armies that drew from large swaths of the Samnite uplands (see [Figure 4.6](#)). Aristocratic lineages are also well attested, both by large burial complexes and by the names of the Samnite commanders mentioned in Roman narratives (see [Figure 4.7](#)).⁸⁴ A network of international relationships was also progressively developed, at least by some more prominent groups.

For centuries, Samnite elites shared a warrior ideology, illustrated by grave goods and depictions, which would not have been dissimilar from that of their lowland peers, and, like them, they routinely promoted seasonal raiding campaigns. The prevalence of this kind of warfare, and the constant, endemic brigandage, made communication across the Apennines problematic, so much so that it was preferable to circumnavigate the peninsula rather than chancing the overland route. Beginning in the late fifth century, however, the range and scope of Samnite raids became much greater and started to threaten the coastal cities directly. In ancient historical narratives, Greek colonies in Campania or Lucania like Poseidonia (later known as Paestum) were “lost” to the Samnites, and the same would have happened to non-Greek cities like Capua and Pompeii.⁸⁵ While certainly Oscan inscriptions started appearing in these centers, it was probably not

⁸¹ Oscan was a part of the Sabellic group of languages that were spoken in most of non-Etruscan central Italy; Wallace 2007; Tagliamonte 2018.

⁸² Gabba and Pasquinucci 1979; Barker 1995.

⁸³ Oakley 1995a; Stek 2009; Hoyer 2012; Scopacasa 2015.

⁸⁴ Capini and Di Niro 1991; Tagliamonte 1996; Briquel and Thuillier 2001.

⁸⁵ Salmon 1967; Pedley 1990: 100–10; Scopacasa 2015: 207–37.

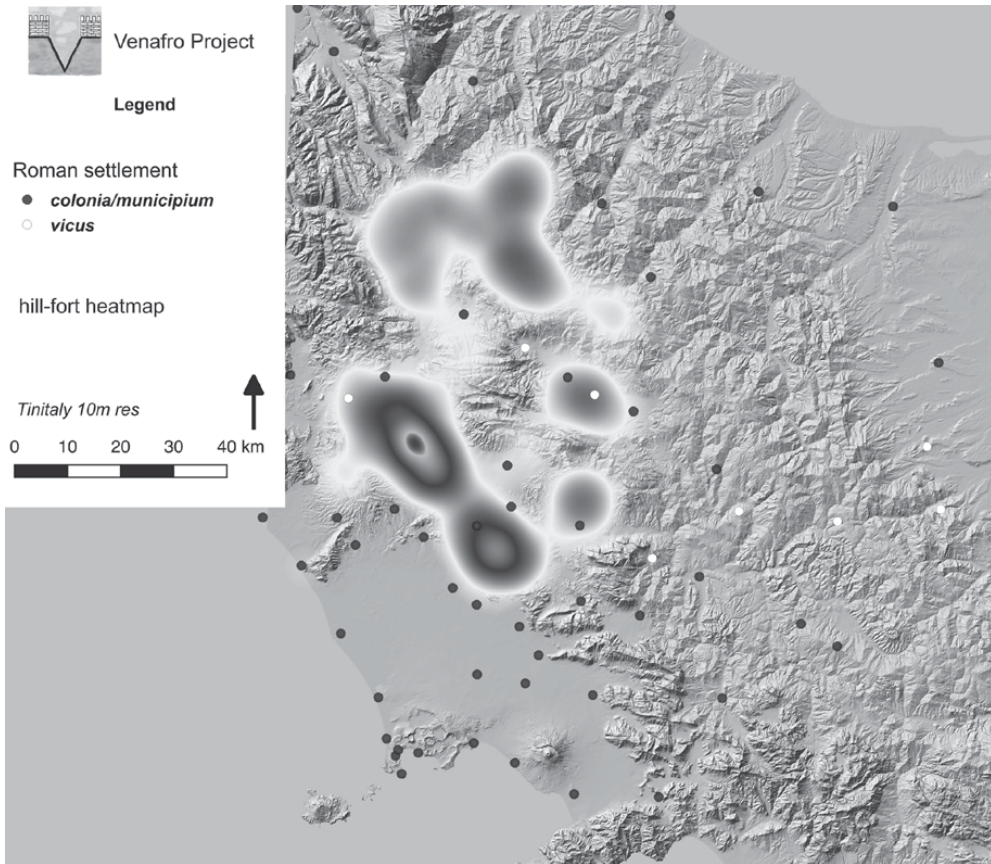


Figure 4.5 Distribution of Samnite hillforts in the fourth and third centuries BCE in “heatmap” format. The shading is darker where their concentration is higher. Their distribution is largely complementary to that of cities, indicated by black circles in the map (white circles indicate villages). The hillforts represented an alternative form of settlement organization, more suited to the terrain and to the socioeconomic structure of the highlands of central Italy (image courtesy of A. Hoer, based on his ongoing doctoral dissertation “Σαυνιτικοὶ πόλεις? Landschaftsarchäologische Evidenzen in Samnium. Die Höhenfestungen und ihr Umland.” Freie Universität, Berlin; see also Oakley 1995b).

as a result of a wholesale occupation by the Samnites, but it certainly signals an interest by some of their elites in the urban game that was being played on the coast. In any case, this did not lead to the spread of urbanism to the upland communities, whose raids in fact would later attack, among others, the selfsame cities they had allegedly occupied. From the early fourth century, there seems to have been a treaty between Rome and some kind of Samnite government, which defined areas of influence and prevented raids

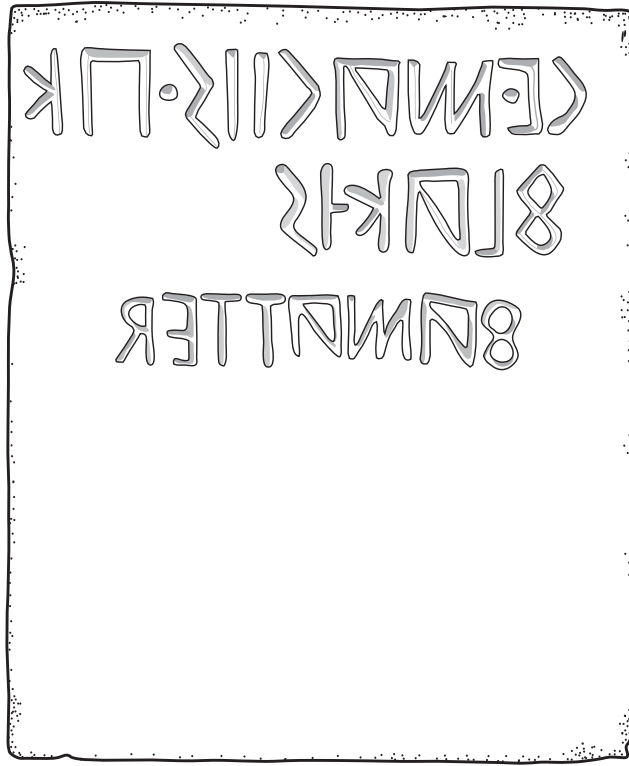


Figure 4.6 Oscan inscription from Aeclanum attesting the presence of the Magii there. The dedicant is a C. Magius Flaccus (Rix 2002; illustration by D. Diffendale)

on Roman lands. When, near the middle of the century, Capua was under threat and surrendered itself to Rome, however, this opened a long season of bitter wars between Rome and the Samnites.

Down to the beginning of the First Punic War, in the 260s BCE, the campaigns against the Samnites represented by far the single largest military commitment of Roman troops. Over time, the Roman strategy clearly expanded its scope from simple containment of the raids to their complete elimination. The Samnite agenda, too, insofar as it can be reconstructed, evolved toward a strong and sustained opposition to Rome's unification project, perhaps with some imperialist designs of its own, culminating in massive clashes like the battle of Sentinum in 295 BCE.⁸⁶ While Rome's military action was often reported as successful, there were also significant defeats, including a very humiliating one, in which the advantages of the broken terrain were fully exploited by the Samnite commanders. Treaties

⁸⁶ Stouder 2014.



Figure 4.7 View of the Samnite necropolis of Fossa, near L'Aquila. Continuously in use from the ninth to the first century, it shows a persistence of local elite funerary practices that is unaffected by the Roman conquest (Cosentino et al. 2001; image courtesy of Bridgeman Images).

were often struck, only to have hostilities resume soon after, perhaps also because of the looser political and legal organization of the Samnites, which made enforcement more problematic than in the case of urban governments.⁸⁷ The foundation of colonies by Rome and the dispatch of garrisons progressively brought Samnium under control in the course of the third century, but it long remained a trouble spot in the peninsula, restless and not as well integrated as the coastal areas. Whenever there was a serious challenge to Roman imperialism, at least some of the Samnites were quick to join in. They did so in the prolonged struggle for dominance against Rome that was mounted in the mid-third century by the Greek city of Taranto in southern Italy together with Pyrrhus, a king from mainland Greece.⁸⁸ Here they seem to have deployed elaborate diplomatic missions, trying to play one aspiring regional power against the other.⁸⁹ Some Samnites, at times splitting along factional lines, went over to Hannibal during the Second Punic War. As late as the early first century, the massive uprising

⁸⁷ Overview in Grossmann 2009.

⁸⁸ Salmon 1967: 280–92.

⁸⁹ Afzelius 1942: 154–70.

of central Italians known as the Social War was led and supported by many Samnite groups.⁹⁰

The impressive record of Samnite resistance to Roman expansion has been discussed frequently in the context of both theories of defensive and aggressive imperialism. In the former, Samnite threat would have triggered Roman military responses, while in the latter the protracted and bloody wars are used as a vivid illustration of the true nature of the process.⁹¹ The distinctive attitude of these uplanders tends to be explained in terms of an indomitable character that would characterize this particular ethnic group. The Samnites, as has often happened to Rome's staunchest adversaries, tend to be depicted as brave but doomed freedom fighters, whose history is a powerful reminder of the violence and the prevarication that made the Roman conquest possible.⁹² While there can be no doubt that the unification of central Italy met one of its greatest challenges in the Apennine zone, there are other, perhaps less idealistic, considerations that can be presented to explain what happened. Contrasting the Samnites with the city-based states may bring out some key variables that made integration more or less appealing, and they go some way toward explaining why the Samnite highlands did not represent yet another success story in the course of the expansion. Discussing these elements may also hold significant clues to how a different process was possible elsewhere in central Italy.

Some of the traits that set Samnite society apart from the world of west central Italian states include the absence of an urban network (perhaps even, at least in some areas, of a permanent state structure), a shorter and thinner history of long-distance elite interconnections spanning other ethnic groups, and the smaller significance of agriculture, and especially commerce and manufacturing, in their economy. Cities were essential to the emerging empire for many reasons. Their political and legal sphere was the arena in which the terms of the incorporation were negotiated, recorded, and, to a certain extent, enforced. Without that, interstate treaties were less effective and more prone to being violated. Relocating to Rome to play the global political game would arguably have involved a bigger readjustment than for people who had lived within a comparable system for centuries. It is most definitely not a coincidence that the spread of Rome always extended to urbanized areas first and promoted

⁹⁰ Mouritsen 1998; Santangelo 2018. Even in that circumstance, however, there were Samnite elites that did not join the rebellion, like the Magii, see pp. 189–91.

⁹¹ Already in Toynbee 1965; Salmon 1967.

⁹² The stock picture of the Samnites is that they were “hell-bent on Rome’s destruction”; deconstruction in Dench 1995. These views went back to scholars like Galanti, see p. 16.

urbanism everywhere else. Similarly, the more limited links between upland and lowland families reduced the opportunities for guiding and influencing the processes that were present elsewhere. More generally, long-distance relationships were at least initially less interesting or essential for Samnite elites, aside from those necessary to the acquisition of prestige items, mostly from the Greek cities in southern Italy, and Taranto in particular. Large-scale overland trade would have been expensive in any case and that further limited the development of manufacturing activities. All these forms of long-distance interaction would have been dramatically facilitated by inclusion within a larger empire, a benefit that would have been less attractive to the Samnites than most other Italians. Finally, the relevance of the pastoral economy relative to agriculture (and especially the production of wine and oil) meant that raiding warfare did not have consequences as disastrous as they were in the coastal regions.

For all the mentioned reasons (and possibly many more), a majority of the Samnites were simply not interested in becoming a part of a larger territorial state, especially if it was organized along the lines promoted by the western coastal states. Previously, the fragmentation into small states enabled them to conduct raids and sack cities, while their vulnerability to retaliation was small, because they occupied a defensible terrain and did not have high concentrations of mobile wealth in large sites, aside from a few sanctuaries. From their vantage point, the spread of Rome, as the surrender of Capua exemplifies, would curb and eventually eliminate raiding and brigandage and limit mobile pastoralism, perhaps to the benefit of farmers, while offering them little in return. While over time small-scale independence may have gradually ceased to be a realistic scenario, for a while at least the Samnites may have hoped to prevent or delay Rome (and the other allied coastal peoples) from pushing their model far inland. Later, when the Samnites threw their lot in with Taranto, Pyrrhus, and Hannibal (or even during the Social War), they strove to redefine the alliance in ways that suited them better. They must have hoped to obtain a greater consideration for their traditional way of life, which was constantly impinged upon by the diffusion of urbanism, the construction of roads, and the subdivision of land for agriculture.

If the motivations for Samnite resistance to expansion are, at least in part, understandable, it should also be wondered why the new empire committed so much of its resources for the conquest of a relatively unproductive, peripheral, and recalcitrant area. The other examples discussed thus far seem to suggest that many states were incorporated with the agreement of a faction inside them and without excessive conflict. It can be argued that

the expansion often followed a path of least resistance, reaching first those states where there were connections and facilitations of various kinds, and armed conflict would not be too prolonged and extensive. The Samnites satisfied none of these conditions, and yet they were involved in the process from a very early stage. There are, however, some evident reasons why the coastal Italian states could not simply ignore or bypass the Samnites. For one thing, their raiding parties had been larger and they had been wandering further, threatening major coastal cities. This was particularly problematic because of the new fragmentation of rural settlements in small farm sites that were much less defensible than the earlier fortified villages. Vineyards and olive groves would take many years to recover from any damage to their vines and trees. This was of course a common concern for states with lots of arable land, and it encouraged a solution in which raids were mutually abandoned, which however would not be relevant for the Samnites.⁹³

Another important element was that the eastern coast of Italy was seeing the emergence of city-based states (see [Figure 4.8](#)). Having for some reason missed out on the first great wave of the early first millennium, in the fourth and third centuries many large settlements were reorganizing themselves in more or less urban forms.⁹⁴ Rome itself was interested in the foundation of colonies in those areas and there was significant economic and political potential in a greater integration between the two coasts. The Samnite highlands were right in the middle, preventing the kind of direct overland communication that in fact would become much more intense after the conquest of the Apennines. So while the expanding Roman state did primarily pursue the aggregation of compatible and not completely reluctant states, it was undesirable for the resulting political geography to be too fragmented and far-flung. Other empires of the time, like the Carthaginian one, were clearly at a disadvantage from the scattered nature of states that had been a major bonus in commercial terms. A large, intractable, and raid-generating enclave in the middle of the empire could cause all sorts of problems. Therefore, the Romans and their allies resorted to the exceptional use of prolonged and expensive bitter violence to deal with the Samnites. At a macroscopic level, the harsh conflict with the Samnites, which dominated the Italian scene for a long time, could be described as one opposing low-land urbanized agriculturalists to highland pastoralists.⁹⁵ In this decisive

⁹³ In this regard, similar considerations applied to other cultures in which raiding played a particularly big part, such as the Gauls, the Ligurians, or the Aequi.

⁹⁴ Overview in Lippolis 2016.

⁹⁵ Livy himself notes this tension Livy, Yardley and, Hoyos 2013: 179 (=Liv. 9.13.7–10); Oakley 1995b: 12–13.

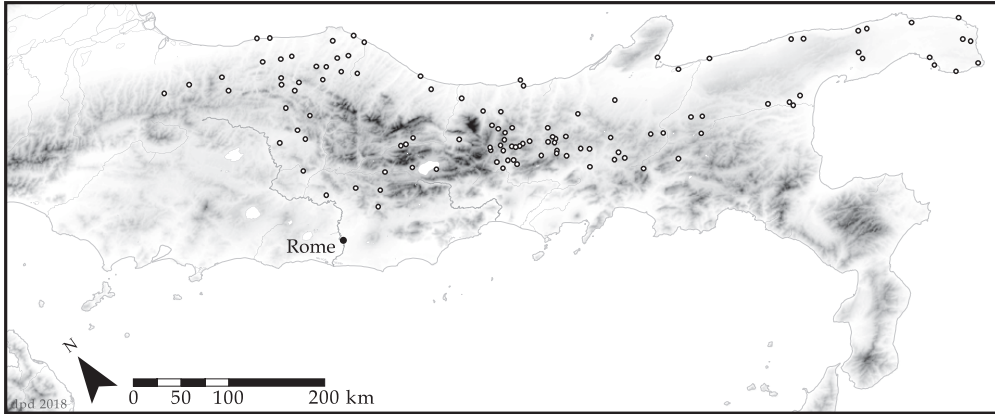


Figure 4.8 Map with new urban foundations of the fourth and third centuries in eastern central Italy and in the highlands. Having not been part of the first wave of urbanization of the early first millennium BCE, these areas witnessed a great diffusion of cities in the time of the conquest (Sewell 2016). Roman colonies were only one aspect of this global phenomenon (illustration by D. Diffendale).

struggle, Rome clearly championed the interests and rallied the forces of the former, and this may well have been yet another reason why many coastal aristocrats saw the conquest not entirely in negative terms. Putting an end to all raiding, and especially that of the uplanders, would have been a desirable outcome for those who stood to lose more from it than they could gain.

The case of the Samnites thus offers us a highly significant instance in which the Roman expansion was indeed made possible only after a sustained military effort against a very recalcitrant group of communities. The interests of the coastal peoples were sharply at odds with those of the Apennines, who reluctantly adapted to the new situation only after a prolonged struggle. A violence-heavy scenario of this kind is in some ways in line with the prevailing models about Roman imperialism, and yet it should not be attributed any paradigmatic value. In the course of the conquest, Vietnam-like involvements like the one with the Samnites happened only rarely, and for reasons that are not impossible to understand. Another instance is offered by the Aequi, an ethnic group occupying the high hills immediately to the east of Rome, whose incorporation history was similar.⁹⁶ And a similar conflict took place, later on, with the Ligurians, who were located further north along the Apennine ridge.⁹⁷ Just like with

⁹⁶ De Luigi 2003; Benelli 2018a.

⁹⁷ Arnaud 2001; Paltineri 2018.

the Samnites, the Romans would have to fight the same war with them over and over.⁹⁸

It is essential to remember in any case that the other central Italians did not put up even a fraction of the resistance deployed by these distinctive groups. Had they done so, it is very dubious that Roman coercion would have been remotely equal to the task. Considering that about half of all recorded campaigns in the period under consideration were fought against the Samnites and the Aequi, it is easy to see that it would have taken only a few more large and powerful communities behaving in the same way to put unification beyond the reach of Rome or of any other urban state. Without a measure of acquiescence, not to say cooperation, a unified peninsular Italy simply would have never come into being, or it would not have lasted long. This also explains why the expansion encountered far less resistance from people that were much richer, more numerous, and politically complex and technologically advanced than the Samnites. Even when golden opportunities to break away presented themselves, it was only very specific groups who defected. Only true alternatives to Rome, like Capua, or incompatible communities geographically trapped in an expanding urbanized empire, like the Samnites, had any inclination to seek a radically different arrangement.

While a lot of violence was deployed in the military conflict with the Samnites, their treatment afterwards was not exceptionally harsh, in line with what happened at Veii or Capua. Elite Samnite families, like the Pontii, maintained a prominent role even after repeatedly leading rebellions against Rome.⁹⁹ Indeed, in later times we see some of them going over to the Roman side and even raising armies to fight on their behalf. Field surveys have shown a remarkable stability of the pastoral economy and of the settlement pattern.¹⁰⁰ Roman roads skirted the region and colonies were only founded at its margins, as if encysting the foreign body without attempting to digest it immediately. Over time, colonies like Alba Fucens acquired a gateway role for the neighboring Samnites, providing a connection with long-range networks that could have won over some of the locals, for instance by providing a global market for the wool production.¹⁰¹

In conclusion, the conquest of the Samnites provides us with another important piece of the puzzle, revealing the structural limitations that the

⁹⁸ Livy himself marvels at the repeated campaigns, which he finds inexplicable, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 16 (=Liv. 6.12.2–6).

⁹⁹ Torelli 1982a; Briquel 2009a.

¹⁰⁰ Barker 1995; Jones 2004; Liberatore 2004.

¹⁰¹ Torelli 1999b: 38–39.

Romans faced in their expansion. Things went relatively smoothly only as long as a reasonable compromise could be found with compatible, urbanized states. When that approach became impossible because of the nature of the communities in question, sheer force was occasionally employed. Its drawback, however, was that it was a blunt instrument that consumed large amounts of resources and often proved indecisive. It was therefore used sparingly, as an ammunition that was very scarce, and only in the exceptional cases in which an irreducible area was strategically vital to the overall balance of the expanding state. And indeed the efforts of coastal urbanized Italians proved only barely sufficient to circumscribe these areas and limit the disruption they could cause, allowing expansion to crawl onward.

Arezzo

In some instances, the conquest directly intersected with another large-scale phenomenon that was taking place in central Italy at the same time, namely the social changes and the unrest that occasionally accompanied them. Our limited evidence seems to suggest that this was particularly an issue in some north Etruscan states in the late fourth and third centuries. A particularly instructive case in this regard is that of Arezzo. Like its peers in the region, the city emerged in inland northern Etruria in the early first millennium, and its elites controlled a vast agricultural territory, rich in mineral resources, and built imposing family tombs.¹⁰² These aristocrats were in all likelihood fully integrated in the complex political life of central Italy, if one believes that as early as the sixth century they had interfered with the kings of Rome and their affairs in Latium.¹⁰³ In the late fourth century, they avoided military action against Rome and established a treaty with it. Perhaps significantly, about ten years later, some sort of rebellion or strife, allegedly involving slaves, took place against one specific dominant lineage, the Cilnii, who certainly had powerful friends in Rome.¹⁰⁴ It is not easy to interpret precisely the nature of this event, and it is impossible to determine the position of this family, who may have been kings of the Arretine state. What is certain is that, although there was neither a war formally declared against Arezzo nor any permanent incorporation of this state within the larger empire, a Roman army was immediately dispatched

¹⁰² Camporeale and Firpo 2009.

¹⁰³ De Sena 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Capozza 1966; Harris 1971b: 114–24; Fatucchi 1995.

to deal with the problem. Not surprisingly, such massive interference in the internal affairs of an allied community quickly restored the Cilnii to power, according to some sources, without any significant violence.¹⁰⁵

Despite the very fragmentary record about the unrest at Arezzo, there are some essential elements that seem quite clear, especially when placed in the context of other comparable events. The Romans often intervened in central Italy whenever there was a threat to the established aristocratic order. This is well attested in the mid-third century at Volsinii, has been supposed in the case of Veii, and is conjectured in other instances on the basis of the available evidence.¹⁰⁶ If the actual factional lines cannot be reconstructed with any reliability, it is clear that the elites who were succumbing in the local political game, especially as a result of social unrest, could activate their long-standing contacts with their friends in other states to (re)gain control of the situation. This was of course based on a tradition that went back to the coups of the sixth and fifth centuries, but which was now taking on a different form and a broader scope. A new factor was definitely introduced by emerging social actors who were challenging the established order, a phenomenon that in various ways was affecting the whole central Mediterranean. Some of these people can be connected with the sharp rise in manufacturing activities that are well attested archeologically in fourth- and third-century peninsular Italy. For instance, Arezzo was famous for its metalwork and its weapons, and so was Volsinii (see [Figure 4.9](#)).¹⁰⁷ In general, it is not hard to argue for a link between the emergence of these kinds of economic activities and a political instability of a new type, not simply between factionalized landed lineages as before, but between them and formerly subordinate social groups.¹⁰⁸ Such instability could lead to revolutions and deep constitutional changes toward broader access to power (often described in terms of “democracy”), instead of simply replacing one elite network with another, which was the typical outcome in previous centuries.

In the changed political landscape, it is extremely significant that the expanding Roman Empire took a strong stance in favor of maintaining the traditional power structure, or at least it tried to slow down and mitigate the

¹⁰⁵ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 232 (=Liv. 10.5.13).

¹⁰⁶ Benelli 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Maggiani 1985; Paturzo 1997: 160–200; production of fine ceramic wares is archeologically attested, Peña and Gallimore 2014.

¹⁰⁸ This connection is clearly visible in many Greek cities in Italy, most notably at Taranto, Giangiulio 2015.



Figure 4.9 Bronze statue of Minerva from Arezzo. Probably a local production of the third century, it exemplifies the flourishing craft activities in the city (Cygielman 2010). They had a role in the emergence of an artisanal urban class that was less tied to the traditional landed elites and was often propounding political reform or even subversion (image courtesy of Alamy).

effects of the changes that the new global developments were producing. Among its many possible incarnations, the Roman army evidently could occasionally function as a sort of federal police force that would intervene to protect the interests of friendly elites. Once again, the existing long-distance aristocratic connections provided a conduit for this new form of political integration. As in other cases, there was little scruple in bringing in a foreign power to solve an internal problem, even at the cost of state independence, as the primary loyalty was to the family and the social class rather than to a specific polity. If one is willing to accept that landed elites in many states throughout Italy were facing similar challenges because of social unrest, then it would be arguable that Rome's unification project had, among its many appeals for landed gentry across the Italian peninsula, the purpose of shoring up and reinforcing the order that had prevailed for

centuries in most of the states that were being incorporated at the time.¹⁰⁹ Becoming a part of a larger empire, with an army large enough to overcome any challenge within an individual state, implicitly ensured that no uprising of the lower classes could ever dramatically overturn the hierarchy that had been in place since the early centuries of the millennium.

Of course it would have been true, in this incorporation scenario as in many others, that the local aristocrats responsible for bringing in the Romans would find their family and factional position within their state consolidated and strengthened. It was another form of political brokerage, which would also have the advantage of helping to preserve the social structure on which aristocrats relied for their power and influence. In addition, the tighter connection with the expanding Roman Empire opened new and wider horizons for the successful brokers. As it happens, we know that the Cilnii whom Rome had saved not only went on to maintain their eminent position in their homeland but had a successful career in Rome itself, which culminated much later in their most famous member, Maecenas, becoming one of the closest advisors of the emperor Augustus.¹¹⁰ Other Arretine families followed a similar path, while the archeological record shows the usual picture of settlement stability for the territory of the city. Traditional farms dotted the landscape and continued traditional forms of agricultural production, despite the settlement of veteran soldiers in the course of the first century.¹¹¹

Conclusions

Any serious attempt at creating a typology of how states and other groups were incorporated into the Roman Empire should include many more instances than the few presented in this chapter. Because this is just one aspect of an overall argument about early Roman imperialism, however, it is hoped that this first approximation will, at least, provide a sense of the variability of the phenomenon. In contrast with the sequential treatment that the vast majority of the scholarship has tended to prefer, an approach of this kind has the potential of bringing out recurrences and patterns that are otherwise much less obvious. Moreover, looking at the biographies of states like Caere or Arezzo, which are representative of a considerable number

¹⁰⁹ A perspective that was already in Harris 1971b: 114–46, even if he went in a different direction in his later works; see however now Harris 2016: 30.

¹¹⁰ Chierici and Maggiani 1986; Costa 2015.

¹¹¹ Chierici 2004.

of polities that did not fight long or sustained wars against the Romans, it provides an important rebalance of the traditional narratives about the conquest. Because of the nature of the annual records that the Roman state was keeping (and the ideology of the dominant elites), ancient accounts of the expansion tended to emphasize military campaigns at the expense of other forms of political interactions. The relentless sequence of campaigns that were waged year after year, with rare intervals of peace, helped construct a stock image of the conquest in terms of both the historiographical format and the real nature of the process. Most attempts at abstracting from the detail of the battlefield events have tended to look at the motivations behind such warlike behavior. It is thus essential, on the one hand, to look at the broader picture of Italy in the fourth and third centuries to properly contextualize the ancient textual sources and, on the other, to tease out the different situations in which Romans and other Italians came together.

A comprehensive but discriminating observation of the wars fought against Italian states can help in reformulating the central and long-standing question about Roman imperialism. If there were many different kinds of wars that were being waged, then the search for a sole mechanism that drove Roman action is not necessarily a productive one. The quest to determine the single, ultimate cause of Roman expansionism is not only a one-sided one but also perhaps one that tries to lump together very different historical situations. When the list of campaigns is considered in this perspective, certain broad groupings are easily recognizable, even if the available information is not always sufficient to make a determination. For instance, a large number of military operations, especially concentrated in the first three-quarters of the fourth century, evidently falls in the category of raiding warfare. A regularly occurring form of private- and state-led activity for centuries, these expeditions were certainly violent and disruptive, but they did not lead to any permanent change in the boundaries of the states involved. To a certain extent, they were not directly relevant to or instrumental in the creation of the empire.¹¹² In the course of the fourth century, dozens of seasonal raiding wars were undertaken. They are not of course termed as such in the texts but are characterized by the emphasis on the army roaming the countryside for loot and the complete absence of major battles or direct attacks on cities. Not surprisingly, they were disproportionately fought against those groups, like the Volsci, the Aequi, the

¹¹² There was perhaps another indirect connection, argued elsewhere in the book, between raiding warfare and the expansion, caused by the spread of small farms and arboriculture, see p. 140.

Samnites, and the Hernici, that occupied the high hills to the south and east of Rome. They were only partially urbanized and they tended to remain faithful the longest to this archaic form of conflict. Also, over time, their raids tended to have longer ranges and could more easily threaten Roman lands. Raiding wars, however, are also attested against states like Tarquinia, Velletri, or Tivoli, which were more or less immediately adjacent to Rome's territory (and even had Roman citizenship in the case of Velletri).¹¹³ They were simply continuing a form of conflict that for centuries had left the political landscape of Italy essentially unchanged.

Another type of conflict that happened relatively frequently was aimed at pushing the state boundaries in one direction or another, but without merging or incorporating entire major states. While technically a form of territorial expansion, it does not appear to have ever led to the annexation of vast amounts of land. Like raiding, this happened before the fourth century, and it often revolved around the control of subsidiary centers located between the main cities, as exemplified by the way in which Fidenae changed hands several times between Rome and Veii. This would continue to happen during the conquest, often with fairly small territorial gains and possible settlement of colonists.¹¹⁴ Typical of these wars is that their outcome is the acquisition (or loss) of one or more fortified subsidiary settlements. They were fought by Rome with neighboring states, such as Tarquinia, Vulci, or Palestrina. They account for a considerable number of yearly campaigns, but their impact on the expansion would not have been sizable. Different was the case of conflicts that had as an outcome the creation or reinforcement of some kind of long-term diplomatic agreement between Rome and some other major state. These are the wars that can actually expand Roman control by large increments over a short span of time. Events of this kind are not as frequent as the other two categories and they definitely do not affect all the states that eventually ended up in the Roman alliance. Quite a few of the main polities in coastal central Italy are represented, such as Tarquinia, Volsinii, Priverno, and Cales, but far from all of them. Even allowing for gaps in our record, it is hard not to conclude that numerous major polities, like Caere, Gabii, Tusculum, and many others, entered into a treaty with Rome without major conflict, but as a result of other processes.

Wars resulting in the elimination of a state were extremely rare, as has been argued in the case of Veii, which is the main instance of this extreme

¹¹³ For Tarquinia, Livy and Luce 1998: 299 (=Liv. 5.16.2–7); for Tivoli, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 69 (=Liv. 7.12.1–5); for Velletri, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 16 (=Liv. 6.12.6).

¹¹⁴ Raaflaub 1996; Rich 2007; Chiabà 2017; These minor gains may have had the advantage of fulfilling a requirement for celebrating a triumph; Auliard 2001.

form of conquest. Only a handful of other cities were ever discontinued (permanently or for a time) as administrative centers, like Capua or Fregellae. More generally, it should be noted how unusual were sieges of major urban centers in the course of the expansion, even those that did not result in destruction but only in a sack (see [Figure 6.2](#)).¹¹⁵ This is remarkable in that it clashes with the commonly held notion that the acquisition of loot was one of the foremost aims of the conquest, and yet it did not impact significantly the main urban centers where most of the portable wealth would have been concentrated. Some of the conflict that directly affected major cities was of yet another kind and had to do with quelling social unrest, as in the case of Arezzo, Volsinii, and others. In those instances, a faction within the city would have called for Roman help and the violence would have been directed to a specific subset of the citizenship, rather than being a generalized attack on the whole state. Conceptually analogous to these police expeditions are those campaigns against brigands and pirates.¹¹⁶ In them, the Roman army performed duties that were not directly aimed at territorial expansion, but rather at the repression of activities that were undesirable for the aristocrats who were at the head of the growing alliance.

Another important, but infrequent, cluster of wars finds its motivation in the desire to renegotiate the terms of the alliance on the part of the non-Romans. As in the war against the Latin allies of the mid-fourth century, these conflicts are often preceded or accompanied by political requests, like the allocation of certain political offices to certain groups of allies. Capua made similar demands and many of the people who revolted against Rome in the early first century Social War arguably had similar goals.¹¹⁷ Often, after the conflict, the requests were at least partially granted, even if the Romans had prevailed on the battlefield. Once again, these wars were not fought between those who wanted a larger empire and those who opposed it, but rather between groups with different views of how the empire should be run. A somewhat similar nature characterizes those wars, also rare, in which rival imperialist bids were clashing. There were no more than a half dozen serious competitors for dominance in the region and not all of them were eliminated through war.¹¹⁸ But when such conflicts took place, they were much harsher and more bitter than any other kind. The two wars fought between Rome and Carthage in the mid- and late third century are

¹¹⁵ See pp. 197–99.

¹¹⁶ Bispham 2012.

¹¹⁷ Dart 2015; Santangelo 2018.

¹¹⁸ Syracuse and Marseille, for instance, entered long-term partnerships with Rome, see pp. 96–97.

obvious examples. They are not the only ones: a similar, protracted war was fought in the same period against Taranto and its ally, the Greek king Pyrrhus. It should also be observed that, toward its end, the decades-long confrontation between the Samnites and Rome progressively took the form of a global struggle between two different concepts of a unified central Italy, culminating in the early third-century battle of Sentinum.

In the rare instances of all-out wars between imperialists, the room for any brokerage and other maneuvers at the private level was severely reduced and the warring sides coincided with political entities much more closely than in most other kinds of conflict. It was still true, however, that within each allied community involved in these wars there would be opposing factions favoring one or the other of the imperialist programs.¹¹⁹ So it is important to remember that in the end, success in these wars would have depended on the amount of support that each of the combatants could recruit across central and southern Italian elites as much, if not more, than military victories alone. In these kinds of conflict, Roman forces were far from having the kind of invincibility that is often implicitly attributed to them. In many instances, what carried them through was the thick and solid network of landed aristocrats everywhere who considered the Roman Empire as the least unwelcome of the realistic alternatives. In this context, it may be significant that some of Rome's imperial antagonists were less rigidly aligned in support of conservative elites and their traditional form of political organization. Taranto, for instance, certainly had, both in practice and in theoretical thinking, strong advocates of constitutional systems that extended power-sharing to nonlanded citizens such as craftsmen and merchants. Carthage, too, while very conservative in many ways, was ruled by a primarily commercial aristocracy rather than a landed one. In this sense, the clashes between imperialists were not just military but also ones of proposed arrangements and structures, philosophies of government as it were, in which the shift of consensus across Italy would determine the final outcome.

In conclusion of this attempt at distinguishing between different kinds of war that were connected with early Roman imperialism, it may be useful to step back again and reconsider the whole phenomenon. While there is no doubt that a massive amount of conflict took place in central Italy during the fourth and third centuries, a very considerable portion of it did not directly result in significant territorial expansion. Despite modern reconstructions envisioning armies fanning out concentrically from Rome, military

¹¹⁹ Gallone 2007; Fronda 2010.

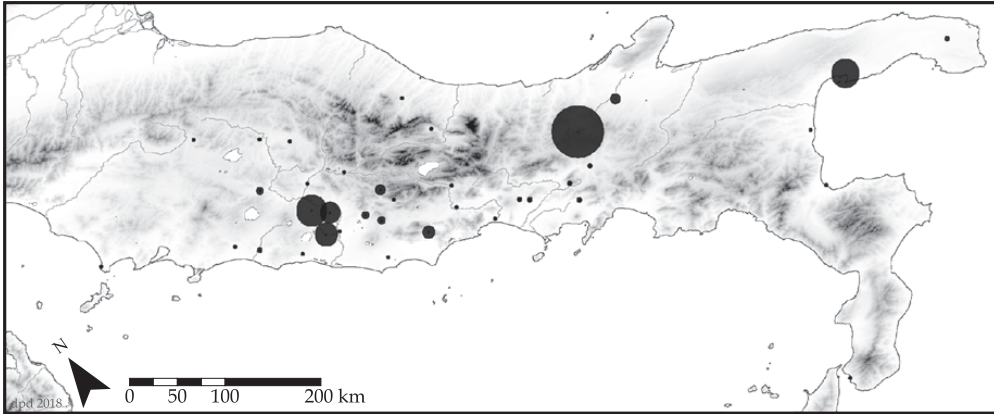


Figure 4.10 Map of the distribution of Roman military action between 400 and 292 BCE, as attested in Livy's work. The size of the circles is proportional to the number of yearly campaigns by a Roman army. Campaigns explicitly described as raids are not included. Campaigns not directed at a specific polity (e.g., against "the Samnites" or "the Etruscans") are grouped together in the relevant area. It is macroscopically apparent how Roman action impacted more heavily the highland communities, rather than the rich cities of the western shore, with the exception of Veii to which the cluster near Rome refers (illustration by D. Diffendale).

operations were very unevenly distributed across Italy (see [Figure 4.10](#)). There is no sense of boundaries being progressively expanded, but rather of a very high number of individual actions in specific locations.¹²⁰ Spatially, there is a constant leapfrogging of areas not militarily conquered, as well as frequently going back deep inside the presumed imperial boundaries of the time. An overwhelming predominance of wars was fought with the less urbanized peoples of the Apennine range compared to those with coastal city-based states. The distribution of Roman triumphs shows a similar pattern (see [Figure 4.11](#)). The coastal states were the entities that could mobilize the most significant resources, and yet Rome fought most seriously and at length with loosely organized and poorly connected groups of highlanders. For many cities and areas, especially on the eastern coast and in the south, there is no record of any significant wars with Rome, not to mention of sieges and incorporation resulting from the conflict. The record for diplomatic contact is not easy to interpret, as well as being likely to have bigger gaps than the military one. For sure, there were hundreds of diplomatic missions, often connected with wars, that involved Rome and other Italian polities in the period of the expansion, but we are only informed

¹²⁰ Carlà-Uhink 2017: 66–67.

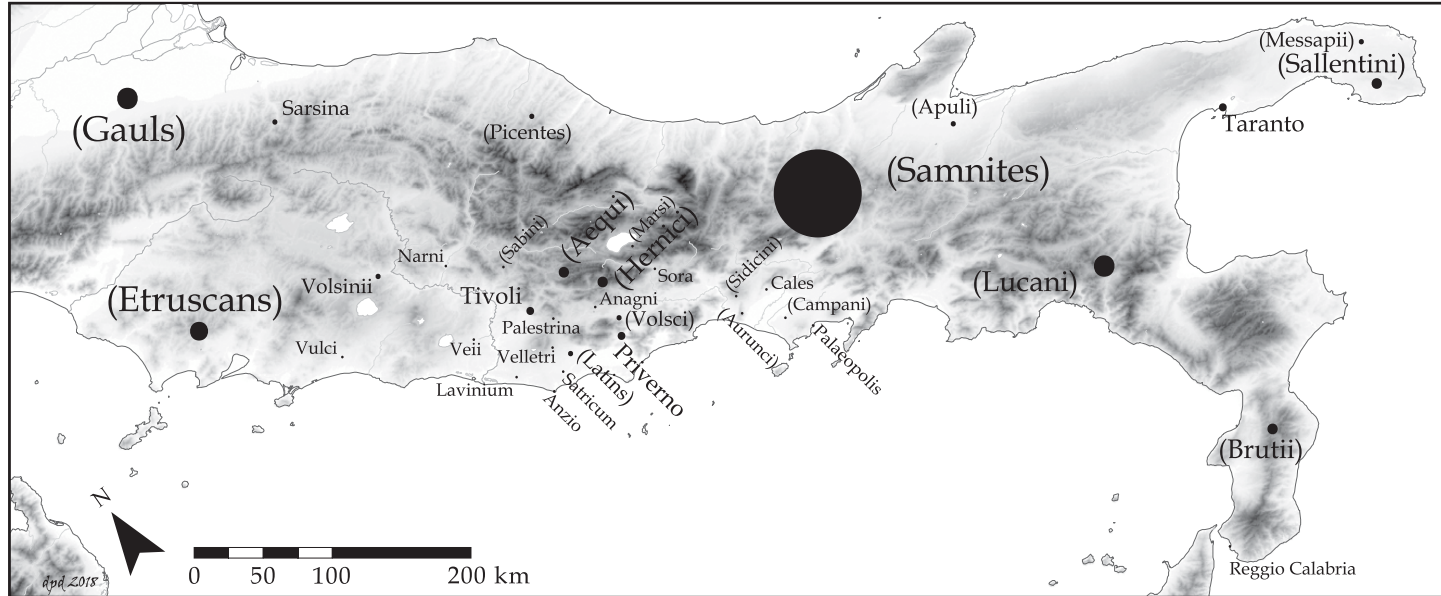


Figure 4.11 Map showing the distribution of Italian polities over which Roman generals celebrated a triumph, based on inscriptions listing them (Degraasi 1947). Triumphs were only granted by the senate for victories characterized by territorial expansion, massacre of the enemy, and acquisition of vast amounts of loot. The size of the circles is proportional to the number of triumphs. In line with the distribution of campaigns in Figure 4.10, they show the prevalence of the highlanders as recipient of violence and depredation (illustration by D. Diffendale).

about a relatively small number of alliance treaties.¹²¹ Even if for many of them we are not sure when they became allies, there can be no doubt that by the end of the third century all Italian polities were in some form of alliance or union with Rome. The incorporation of many of these entities must have happened with little or no conflict, but rather through negotiation between elites. These instances, precisely because they were uneventful, have tended to be cursorily treated in ancient and modern accounts.

It seems hard not to conclude from this evidence that war was only one of a host of factors that brought Italy together. Despite its ubiquity, it often contributed only in complex and indirect ways to the expansion. It has long been commonplace to list Roman military campaigns and to highlight the fate of Veii, Capua, or the Samnites to argue for the violent and disruptive nature of the whole process, but these instances of massive impact can be shown to be the exception rather than the rule. Even if the conjectures presented here were deemed unacceptable, it should at least be open for debate whether the Romans really subdued and kept Italy together by means of sheer force. Scholarly room should be made for careful explorations of the forms of negotiation and networking that were underpinning many cases of incorporation. Often the violence did not bring about expansion, and often it was directed only at a faction within a state; in some cases it may even have been in part symbolic or meant to save face.¹²² The struggle for elite consensus was at least as important for the aristocrats who were putting the empire together. In a way, they put on the table of long-distance elite interactions a standing offer to take part in a new entity that offered certain guarantees and benefits. Undoubtedly, some state leaders joined under varying degrees of duress for their polities, but many others had a choice and probably used their allegiance as a bargaining chip to obtain the best possible terms. As it is demonstrated by their behavior after the conquest, many elites must have come to the conclusion that integration within the Roman Empire was at worst the lesser evil and at best a golden opportunity. For them, entering the alliance did not involve radical changes in the cultural, economic, or social sphere, but, on the contrary, guaranteed the stability of the traditional order, which new developments were challenging in many states. The new structure could offer social stability, local autonomy, opportunities for stronger long-distance influence, and a relatively fair system for participating in the imperial decision-making. Membership of the new entity did not so much require loyalty to a specific

¹²¹ Auliard 2006a.

¹²² Oakley 1985.

faction or flag but rather to a certain structure and set of rules. Seen in this light, it becomes much easier to understand how such an astounding speed and durability was maintained throughout the first phase of expansion and why Roman and non-Roman elites alike benefited from it, while at the same time allowing us to see the latter as active participants in the process. The conquest thus ceases to be the domination of one ethnic group over many others, and becomes instead the victory of a majority of Italian landed and urban elites favoring integration over those other actors who opposed it or would have preferred different arrangements.

It will no doubt be objected that a reconstruction of this kind is blatantly belied by the successive history of central and southern Italy. Indeed, the traditional views about the institutional and cultural homogenization of the peninsula have tended to match closely the models of Roman imperialism, to the point of appearing as two facets of the same process.¹²³ In this sense, even if there was an element of negotiation and consensus in the mix, it would not change the fact that the long-term outcome saw a triumph of Roman hegemony and culture. In this perspective, it may even have been true that some non-Romans saw opportunities in the conquest, but the end result was not favorable for most of them. Reflections of this kind highlight the need to evaluate the consequences of the conquest, including the furthest reaching ones, to obtain a well-balanced assessment of the process in its entirety. Once again, however, a close and unorthodox examination of the impact of the conquest, both on communities and on individual families, brings out a complex picture that provides an instructive complement to the observations made so far. The next two chapters are devoted to attempting, in a comprehensive and context-sensitive way, a fresh reevaluation of what happened in central Italy in the aftermath of the Roman conquest.

¹²³ Among the many examples, David 1994; MacMullen 2000

5 | A Heterogeneous Conquest II: Family Biographies and Agendas

Introduction

The early phases of the Roman conquest have often been narrated in a rather depersonalized way. Because they typically lack the larger-than-life characters of the later periods, the Pompeys, the Caesars, or the Mark Antonys, it has been tempting to consolidate the endless sequence of magistrates with similar-sounding names in the abstraction represented by the Roman state.¹ In the case of the non-Romans, this has been made even easier by the rarity of mentions of specific historical characters in the Latin sources. Focusing on the epic, all-out clashes with the Carthaginians or the Samnites, it has become natural to gloss over the individual agency and perspective of the people who made the actual decisions that determined the final outcome, especially in the myriad of one-to-one relationships between Rome and each individual state of central and southern Italy. And yet when a different perspective is adopted and the biography of a polity and its dealings with the Romans are considered carefully enough, fragments of a rich tapestry of interpersonal relationships emerge. Such detail does not simply nuance the traditional reconstructions but can actually add an entire other dimension to our understanding of the very nature of this historical process. Further progress toward breaking down the monolithic narratives about Roman imperialism can be achieved by concentrating our attention on the biographies of specific elite family groups, which can be seen to be pursuing complex strategies that do not necessarily coincide with the official actions undertaken by state governments. Individuals, lineage groups, factions, and other kinds of private agents were often operating on another plane from the state-sanctioned one, and at times they were able to manipulate the latter for their own purposes.²

¹ This temptation was not unknown to the Romans themselves, if the elder Cato had written a historical work that omitted entirely the names of the consuls and of the other commanders. This was, however, in reaction to the exaltation of family histories in the predominant discourse of his time; Gotter 2009.

² This approach is informed by works that focus on individual actions in early states; Yoffee 2005; Blanton and Fargher 2008.

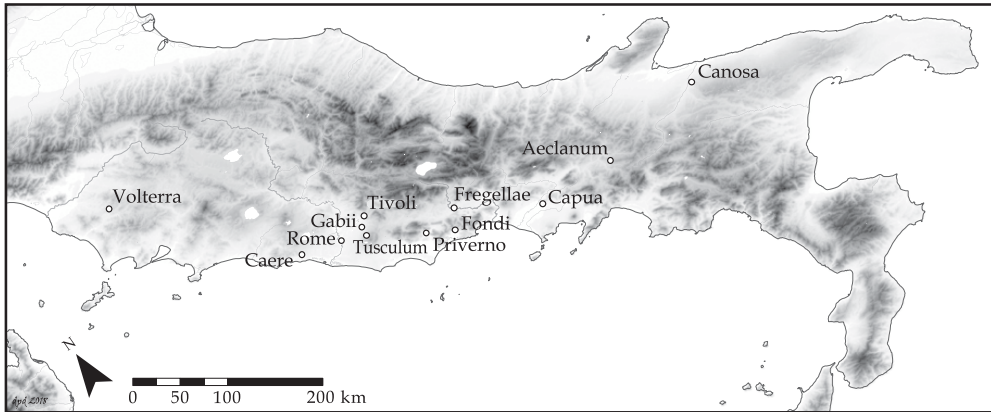


Figure 5.1 Map of Italy with the locations mentioned in [Chapter 5](#) (illustration by D. Diffendale).

Therefore, in addition to analyzing how individual communities interacted with Rome and became progressively incorporated within the empire, there might be an even greater potential for new insights by taking a different approach, one in which we follow private agents across different states and periods and try, whenever possible, to understand the strategies that they deployed (see [Figure 5.1](#)). In line with the overall concept developed so far, it is argued here that some component groups within cities were at least as important in shaping the conquest as the concerted actions carried out in the name of abstract political entities. Within the broader discourse on these issues, what makes this case particularly interesting is the presence of an unusually rich historical record for such an early period. There are of course the canonical literary texts and lists of Roman magistrates, but also a remarkable wealth of inscriptions in other Italian languages, as well as archeological evidence, especially from burials. While there is no denying that enormous gaps remain, it is still the case that central Italy in the fourth and third centuries can provide a fascinating, if fragmentary, case study in the complexities of long-distance power transactions in emerging premodern territorial empires. Necessarily, elites, both Roman and non-Roman, tended to receive the lion's share in this narrative.³ This emphatically does not mean a return to the nineteenth-century idealist focus on great men and great deeds. It is primarily a question of historical visibility and of who was leading the groups that can be seen operating on the political scene. Segments of nonelite society probably existed that had a significant and

³ For a definition of the concept of elite, see pp. 43–51.

autonomous role, but the integration of their agency in our reconstructions is difficult, even with the help of archeology.⁴ It should be noted in passing, however, that in those vertically integrated social formations the actions at the top are more tightly connected with the consensus of the whole group than in horizontally layered citizenships. Occasionally, nonelite behaviors and concerns can be conjectured on the basis of elite actions about which we are informed, as in the mentioned cases of social unrest.

The richness of the available material has given rise to an entire field of study, which has taken the name of prosopography, and has had a very long and distinguished scholarly discourse, ranging from compilations to more narrative accounts of specific families or individuals.⁵ Of particular relevance here are a group of works published in the 1960s and 1970s that went much further into the actual complexity of the political process, focusing on elite connections between families, individuals, and communities.⁶ And yet the full implications of these ground-breaking reconstructions have not been brought to bear in full on the contemporary prevailing accounts about the Roman conquest, which still tended to take the one-sided approach of Roman military campaigns and colonizations. In this sense, it cannot but surprise us to hear a scholar who has few rivals in his command of the material conclude a masterful reconstruction of the intricate interrelations of Roman and non-Roman elites by saying, “it was not inconsistent with a polarized Roman hegemony.”⁷ The fine-grained detail that is available, at least in some cases, makes it instead possible to break down simple statements about the Roman conquest into an analysis of the role individual groups and networks played in shaping the real process.

The growing evidence in support of the presence of networks based on friendship, patronage, and intermarriage between aristocratic lineages across all sorts of ethnic and political boundaries casts a very different light on a process often described simply in terms of socioeconomic hegemony that benefited only the Romans. Indeed a strong ethnic polarization between Romans and non-Romans has dominated the discourse, despite the growing evidence for the existence of frequent horizontal interstate

⁴ For an example of a study of nonelite mentality and agency in one community, see Terrenato 1998b.

⁵ Such as the extensive lists of notable characters collected in Broughton 1951; for praetors, Brennan 2000; for specific biographies, e.g., Earl 1963; Astin 1967; Humm 2005; broad theoretical framework in Stone 1971.

⁶ Badian 1958; Càssola 1962; Wiseman 1971; Jehne and Pina Polo 2015, all building on Münzer 1920.

⁷ Wiseman 1971, 63.

aristocratic linkages across different Italian cultures. If on the one hand research on complex elite networks has been contributing to a breakdown of the traditional political framework for the conquest, on the other, key assumptions underpinning theories of straightforward Roman aggression (or in any case of predominance of the military sphere) have been coming under closer scrutiny. Just like the states to which they belong, so the armies, the magistrates, and the senates of the warring states appear as much less compact entities than generally believed. It is becoming clear how they were composed of heterogeneous agents, who often had a variety of different political agendas, rather than simply pushing with all their strength for the advancement of the state to which they belonged. The scholarship has progressed so much in this direction that it is now possible to assess the significant role that family and private agency had in the Roman conquest, to the point where it can be hypothesized that these elements were at least as important as the state-level politics within which they operated.

The Roman Army and its Commanders

The Roman army always figured very prominently in every account of the conquest, both at the popular and scholarly levels. The marching legions are one of the most powerful icons of Western culture, representing the quint-essential embodiment of relentless state-controlled violence in the service of territorial expansionism. Depending on the point of view and historical period, this icon may have been constructed as a positive role model that modern colonialist powers should follow or as an archetypal example of the worst form of oppression, but its explanatory role was never (and it is still far from being) radically questioned.⁸ From Machiavelli to contemporary popular accounts, the Roman one is a citizen army possessing perfect organization and single-mindedness, traits that explain its successes and therefore, of course, expansion itself (see [Figure 5.2](#)).⁹ And indeed virtually every single account of Roman imperialism relied, in one form or another, on the assumption that Rome possessed a preponderant military advantage, which gave it a clear competitive edge over its opponents. Despite the fact that their weapons and organizational technology were not significantly different from those of other central Italians (and arguably inferior in

⁸ For the reception of the Roman army, Hingley 2000; Munzi 2001a; Terrenato 2001a. Postcolonialist approach in Bénabou 1976.

⁹ E.g., McNab 2010, but also Harris 1979, a view that ultimately goes back to Polybius.



Figure 5.2 Renaissance etching of the Roman army clashing with the Samnite one. It was created by Tobias Stimmer as a figure for a 1574 edition of Livy. Even aside from the obvious anachronisms, it is illustrative of the prevailing perception of the Roman army as a ruthless destructive force (image from Bartsch, Adam von, Strauss, Walter L., and Spike, John T. 1978. *The Illustrated Bartsch*. New York: Abaris, courtesy of Abaris).

the case of some southern Italian states), the Romans, if one believes their own narratives, won a vast majority of the battles they fought, and modern scholars naturally saw in this the decisive factor that determined the success of the expansion.

There are many weaknesses inherent in placing too great an emphasis on the military component of the process. As we have seen, expansionist Roman warfare in central Italy was very unevenly distributed, with a very heavy predominance of military operations in the uplands along the Apennine ridge, leaving the conquest of many other areas not directly explained as the result of military action (see [Figure 4.10](#)).¹⁰ Another problem, which should be addressed here, is that many reconstructions

¹⁰ See pp. 150–51.

have adopted a stock image of the Roman army that is essentially based on old-fashioned views of the later imperial army of the first few centuries CE. While of course we are much better informed, through literary and epigraphic texts, as well as through archeological finds, about Roman military forces of this period, it must be stressed how radically different it was from that of the early centuries of the conquest.¹¹ The later Roman army was professional, relatively homogenous, often permanently stationed, and directly controlled by the executive power in Rome. Only exceptionally would it be involved in new conquests, which would take the form of multiyear campaigns in very remote regions, rather than yearly campaigns within a range of a few hundred kilometers. Moreover, even the later army has been the object of radical deconstruction attempts in recent research, which has led to much more nuanced views of it, finally treating Roman military groups as a part of broader local communities.¹² This shift to a more socially embedded understanding of the army is only beginning to influence Roman military studies for the earlier period. The tendency has long been to produce abstract, somewhat timeless accounts of legion structure, orders of battle, and tactics based on the few available, and inconclusive, written sources.¹³ The main concern in terms of the social implications of the army is often limited to its relationship with the wealth classes into which the Roman citizenship was allegedly divided, or with the broader demographic and logistical issues.¹⁴ Only very recently sustained attempts have been made at defining the peculiar nature and ideology of the Roman army and its commanders before the first century BCE.¹⁵

Another important issue is that most overviews that cover the Roman army in the time of the conquest of central Italy are based on the assumption that the army was a direct manifestation of the entire citizen body, arranged in a homogeneous infantry formation with some cavalry and other troops, including allied contingents.¹⁶ According to traditional narratives, in the course of the fourth century the Roman army would have undergone a radical transformation, from lines of spearmen to groups of javelin-throwing soldiers, some armed also with swords. This whole model has come under convincing criticism in recent years. The idea that the original army had three lines of spearmen of increasing seniority and rank, flanked

¹¹ A point forcefully made in Armstrong 2016.

¹² E.g., James 2002; Hanel 2007.

¹³ E.g., Keppie 1984; Goldsworthy 2003.

¹⁴ Rosenstein 2004; Roth 1999; overview in Forsythe 2007.

¹⁵ Vervaeke 2014; Drogula 2015; Armstrong 2016.

¹⁶ E.g., Goldsworthy 2003; Southern 2006.

by two small groups of horsemen and screened by a line of skirmishers, seems to have been a conjecture by later authors. They would have based it on fourth- and third-century Greek armies, which were characterized by essentially egalitarian units of spearmen (known as hoplites) that reflected the broader-based civic structure of many Greek states.¹⁷ Consequently, it is hard to determine what the original form of the Roman army would have been.

An analogous skepticism has been applied in the literature to the alleged existence of hoplite units in the Etruscan armies. In their case, in the almost complete absence of any written records, a structure similar to the Greek one was sometimes postulated primarily on the basis of the weapons found as grave goods and on some depictions of soldiers on vases. The simple portrayal of small groups of spearmen with similar equipment is not sufficient, however, even in the case of Greece itself, to infer that the whole army was organized along those lines.¹⁸ Indeed what little we understand about Etruscan society more broadly, and about their military organization specifically, points strongly instead to the predominance of far less homogeneous types of army, whose organization reflected the civilian structures that expressed them. The sense is that aristocrats led contingents of their dependents, at least in the sixth and fifth centuries, sometimes on behalf of a state and other times as a private enterprise (or as a combination of the two).¹⁹ The actions of warlord-like figures such as the king of Chiusi Porsenna or the Vibenna brothers can only be explained in this context, and there are explicit references to Etruscan armies fighting Rome in 400 BCE being composed of the “best men and their dependents.”²⁰ The latter are best understood as clients and other social dependents rather than serfs or slaves.

After its fourth-century reorganization, most of the Roman army was subdivided into maniples. These were small units of infantrymen that were loose enough to throw their spears but could then close ranks for hand-to-hand combat. The most aristocratic soldiers would fight in larger units at the back. It has been recently argued that this structure was not completely different from the one that existed before, and was therefore still connected with the private armies of yore. In a recent and thorough study,

¹⁷ Armstrong 2016: 111–28.

¹⁸ Doubts about the likelihood of an Etruscan hoplitic army were already in Momigliano 1966: 593–94; Stary 1981. Overview in Egg 2017. Critique of the model for the Greek world in Snodgrass 1993.

¹⁹ d’Agostino 1990; Torelli 2011.

²⁰ Rawlings 1999.

the manipular army has been described as being like an aggregation of “Rome’s early warbands,” emphasizing the relative freedom of action that each maniple would have.²¹ Some ancient authors say that the new tactic was an imitation of how the Samnites fought. While this may or may not be true, it is in general likely that the Roman army of the fourth and third centuries was part of a system of reciprocal influences with its central Italian equivalents, in Etruria, Latium, and Samnium. These were the armies that it was regularly in conflict with, which would have led to adopting common military structures.²² It is also important to remember that the same kind of armies that fought the Romans would become allied contingents soon after the conquest, and there is little reason to think that they would have radically changed their nature once they fought alongside the Romans. Evidence for this can be found in episodes such as that of the Campanian Minatius Magius, who as late as the early first century raised an army of his relatives and dependents to fight on Rome’s side.²³ Now in all likelihood, the allied troops summoned by the consuls would show up under the command of their own local aristocrats and loyalty to them held sway much more than any political abstractions or diplomatic terms.²⁴ In conclusion, there is considerable amount of evidence suggesting that Roman and non-Roman armies in this period bore structural similarities to the warbands of earlier periods. As was the case then, conquest-era contingents were the expression of a society that was articulated by multiple links of patronage and social dependency.

Reconstructions of the nature of the Roman army in the time of the early conquest should have as their background the military organizations bearing the deep mark of the quasi-feudal societies that produced them. In many scholarly perspectives, there is a growing acceptance that in the early Roman army and in other Italian armies throughout their existence the allegiance to elite lineages and factions had an extremely important role in determining not simply their structure but their very behavior on the field of battle.²⁵ When it comes to the Roman army of the conquest period, however, many scholars have maintained that a radical change had taken place and that a purely civic army had emerged.²⁶ Class divisions

²¹ Armstrong 2016: 267.

²² Rawlings 2007; for an interesting reconstruction of the relationship between Roman and Latin armies, Meunier 2014.

²³ Lamoine 2004: 457–58.

²⁴ Ilari 1974; Jehne 2006; Pfeilschifter 2007; Kent 2012; Kent 2018.

²⁵ E.g., Timpe 1990.

²⁶ Recent restatement in a review in Drake 2002, 13–2; Rosenstein 2017.

according to wealth of course would still have made a difference in the assignation of soldiers to service in the cavalry or in the different infantry lines. Aside from those factors (whose precise significance is in any case often debated), the Roman army is often otherwise considered to have been free from “vertical” subdivisions, separating soldiers of the same rank and reflecting social or political differences within the civic body. There is of course always mention of the *centuriae*, the companies in which each unit was subdivided, but there is virtually no discussion anywhere of any relevance that these formations may have had beyond the tactical level. This is particularly surprising when one remembers that they also represented the constituencies of one of the three electoral assemblies of the Roman state. In what was termed the centuriate meeting, the army bearing weapons would meet outside the boundaries of the city. In this occasion, each *centuria* would express an electoral vote, starting with those belonging to the highest wealth class.²⁷ The assembly, which was called to vote on crucial matters for the state, starting with the election of the magistrates, was always heavily politicized and slanted in favor of the elites. Service in a given *centuria* was a function of wealth class as well as (at least since the late third century) of membership in the corresponding tribe, which in turn was crucial to one’s political allegiance.²⁸ Tribes and *centuriae* tended to be controlled by factional and lineage groups, which constantly tried to stack them in order to control their electoral vote, in a practice that is not far from modern gerrymandering.²⁹ There is ample evidence that networks of social links of various kinds played a crucial role in determining the vote of the tribes, to the point that laws were later passed to curb this practice.³⁰

Given the highly charged political value of the divisions within the centuriate citizen body in peace time, it is hard to see how they would not also influence how the army performed its duties in campaigns and other operations. The various *centuriae* within which the army was subdivided would have different compositions and potentially different shades of loyalty to their commanders, according to tribal and class derivation, increasing their similarities with the warbands of yore. Their noncommissioned officers, the centurions, shared the same background and were in all likelihood connected to their soldiers by family and social ties. A further factor to be considered is the fact that each year the armies that took to the field could be radically different from the one of the previous year.

²⁷ Taylor 1966: 85–106; Mouritsen 2017: 39–50.

²⁸ Cosi 2002: 79–86.

²⁹ Ross Taylor 1966, 65–7; the parallel is already in Wells 1920: 450.

³⁰ Lintott 1990

This was a function of the process of selection of conscripts made by the commanders at the beginning of each military season. Significantly called the *dilectus* (literally, the pick or the choice), it was not a mere formality but involved instead wide latitude, as proven by the frequent controversies it engendered.³¹ Far from being the professional army often implicitly envisioned by modern scholars, with permanent enrollment and ranks, the Roman legions in the fourth and third centuries were arbitrarily drafted from the eligible men in each *centuria* by the newly elected commanders. This could involve a general reshuffle in which many men who had served the previous year would be dismissed and new ones brought in. The ranks could also be reassigned and veteran centurions, if they were called again, would not automatically be guaranteed to maintain their position in the army, but would have to be selected again for officer rank (although this may have been the prevailing custom).³² Furthermore, each general's staff would be handpicked, often among relatives and friends of the commander, while some senior officers (the military tribunes) were apparently elected by the *centuriae*.³³

In other words, there was no equivalent of the kind of professional military career that was possible in the Roman army much later. It is only to be expected that this entire process, given its significance in shaping the morale of the troops, the conduct of the war, the battlefield fortunes of its leaders (and, by implication, the political ones as well), and the distribution of loot and prestige, would have been heavily contested and factionalized. The commanders would of course have wanted to maximize the loyalty of their army as well as promoting their patronage networks by means of the distribution of honors and responsibilities. There is also some evidence that being recruited in a subordinate position could be an unfavorable treatment reserved for people who were not in the good graces of the commanders, and who as a result might try to dodge a call of that kind.³⁴ When seen in this light, the relationship between the yearly Roman armies and their commanders is strongly reminiscent of the kind of personalized leadership that existed in earlier periods, as has been reconstructed in an important recent work.³⁵ It is unlikely, however, that the “quasi-feudal” nature of

³¹ Dobson 2008: 47–66.

³² This seems to be the implication of a law passed in the mid-third century, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 109 (= Liv. 7.41.7–8); see also the exemplary later case of Ligustinus, Keppie 1984: 53–55; Cadiou 2002.

³³ Pinsent 1975; Drogula 2015: 83–84.

³⁴ Nicolet 1980: 97–102.

³⁵ Drogula 2015: 8–46.

command envisioned there would have been quickly institutionalized with fourth-century reforms. There is instead ample evidence to suggest that the evolution toward a completely civic army was gradual, piecemeal, and never thoroughly complete. The Roman general, who had originated as a private warlord and who, by the time of Sulla and Caesar, had become an individualistic military dictator, in the intervening period of the conquest was only very rarely a pure public servant of the state.³⁶

These considerations provide a background for a more nuanced understanding of the behavior and priorities of the hundreds of yearly incarnations that the Roman army underwent during the span of the conquest. It would be imprudent to assume, as it is often done, that they were always monolithic entities that served solely the interest of the state that they nominally represented. At least some of the time, they could have had very specific factional agendas, not necessarily shared by all soldiers in a uniform way, and probably linked to the political discourse within the city and specifically with the electoral process that had led to the selection of the commanders in any given year. Just as lineages and factions colored the voting assemblies, often producing sharp internal clashes and even unrest, some of the same processes should be expected to have spilled over into the centuriate army as well. Indeed there was a sort of feedback loop between the two entities, in that the assembly voted in the leaders; they in turn handpicked and ranked the soldiers and led them to wars, whose outcomes were crucial for future electoral successes. Mechanisms of this kind must have provided factions with ample opportunities to further their private agendas. They could take armies that in constitutional theory belonged to the entire community and put them to their service instead.³⁷

Factional dealings, of course, are not frequently described in the extant historical material, which was written much later and generally after the civil wars of the first century made factionalism a very disagreeable topic in Roman political discourse. But they can often be discerned by reading between the lines. For instance, in 342, an army was left to winter at Capua and the following year it refused to obey the orders of the newly elected commanders, to the point of mutinously marching on Rome. Even in the romanced version of later historians, it was their former commander who

³⁶ For “warlordism” in the Late Republic, Rankov 2017.

³⁷ A clear example is that of L. Postumius Megellus in the early third century, who repeatedly understood his command as giving him complete control of his troops, allowing him to overrule direct senatorial orders. He crossed a line when he had his troops work his land and was eventually prosecuted and fined heavily. But his behavior is indicative of the mentality of the generals of the time; see Gabrielli 2003.

was brought in as dictator to reason with the rebellious troops, as they clearly owed their primary loyalty to the magistrate who had drafted them in the first place.³⁸ While he was in Rome to hold new elections, the rioting troops had simply selected another commander of their own, instead of waiting for the magistrates of the new year. It seems significant that neither the old nor the new commander were overly shocked by this behavior. To later military eyes such behavior would amount to no less than gross insubordination, especially when we think that Roman armies were disciplined with an iron fist that did not shy away from floggings, executions, and decimations.³⁹ But those harsh measures were underpinned by the oath that soldiers had sworn after enrollment to serve their commander (and evidently no one else in the case under discussion). So at Capua, far from disciplining the insubordinates, the new general simply dismissed without further action individual soldiers and entire units until he obtained an army that was reshuffled enough to be reliably loyal to him. In a way, this process of selection in reverse can be seen as a mirror image of the *dilectus*, emphasizing the role of personal connections in the composition and arrangement of the army.

With the progressive increase of the frequency of multiyear campaigns in the late fourth and third centuries, the system faced a challenge, which was typically dealt with by extending for an extra year or two the command of a consul involved in one of those wars. Meanwhile, the new consuls would have raised new armies of their own, which would be directed to different wars. The whole system, in short, showed significant signs of being geared to conform to the highly personal nature of military command in this period. Rather than a cohesive, citizen standing army articulated in divisions commanded by generals, each year there were two or more ad hoc armies led by elected politicians who had a major role in choosing the soldiers they would lead and in assigning them to rank. These armies had only very generic orders and little oversight from the senate, so they roamed widely, in keeping with their nature as successors of the raiding parties of a previous era. Indeed the writ given to each general (known as *provincia*) had slowly evolved from a wide-ranging license to pillage to more geographically bounded orders, but it never lost its broad latitude.⁴⁰ Once the command given by the senate to each commander expired, his army typically was disbanded. His soldiers could be called again to serve by another commander, but they would not necessarily be organized in the same configuration.

³⁸ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 104–09 (=Liv. 7.38–41); discussion with other examples in Messer 1920.

³⁹ Hénaut 2016.

⁴⁰ On *provincia*, see Drogula 2015: 131–80.

If one takes the long-term perspective on the Roman army over the course of the first millennium, it should be added, there is a recurrence of personal and factional elements that compose an overall picture of remarkable consistency. The private aspects of preconquest warfare have already been discussed, and the later developments deserve a brief mention too, so that this component does not appear simply as a disappearing residual vestige of an archaic system, but rather as a persistent mechanism that permeated the social context of the Roman army for a long period of time. There is hardly any need to recall that the following era, from the late second century onward, was colored by powerful civil clashes between Roman (and allied) armies. These wars could not have happened without the fierce personal attachment of these armies to the commanders that had put them together in the first place and had led them in successful multiyear campaigns.⁴¹

Great generals like Sulla, Pompey, or Caesar often raised legions from specific regions, showing a preference for those where there were already patronage connections in place, as was the case with Pompey in eastern central Italy.⁴² While these specific quasi-feudal behaviors are often dismissed as a degeneration of the state system connected with the exceptional circumstances produced by the civil wars, they are instead a long-term structural element and can be understood as yet another form that factionalism and individualism could take in Italian armies. Personal loyalties and patronage networks always played a sizable role in putting together armies of all kinds in conquest-era Italy. In this light, the conventional monolithic views about the Roman army in this period would make it appear as an exception to a fairly consistent pattern of dynamic tension between abstract civic priorities and the actual practice of Roman military leaders. Perhaps it would be wise to make at least some intellectual room for a possible deconstruction of these long-held beliefs about the machinery and the mentality of the conquest.

Family Agendas in Military Campaigns

Conceptualizing armies in central Italy in the time of the conquest as constantly straddling and redefining the boundary between public and private can be seen as a component of the broader debates about how states operated

⁴¹ Lintott 1999.

⁴² Seager 2002: 20–24; Pompey's family must have been allied with local elites if a noble from the region was a member of his military staff; Delplace 1996; Torelli 1999b: 117.

at that time. In a variety of contexts, the true motivations underpinning the actions of state officials and other leaders have been questioned, from the introduction of laws serving particular interests to the administration of public property for private benefit.⁴³ The presence of behaviors of this kind has long been accepted, but it has often been dismissed as an aberration from the norm, especially in the case of Roman politicians, who tend to be widely credited with an unmatched sense of the state. The possibility that these kinds of behaviors were instead an integral, ubiquitous, and even expected element of civic life has not been seriously contemplated, almost as if doing so would in some inconceivable way undermine the paradigmatic role that the Roman Republic has had in Western political thought. It is instead arguable that the very nature of central Italian states in the time of their unification was profoundly affected by the family and corporate agency of those who made crucial decisions in it, on the Roman as well as on all the other sides.

Any consideration of expansionism in factional terms is of course intertwined with the very controversial issue of party politics in republican Rome, which needs to be briefly considered here. There have been a number of contributions on this subject that have maintained the presence of well-defined political sides.⁴⁴ These factions could for instance pursue a more aggressive agenda or a more defensive one, they could represent the views of specific classes, such as the landed nobility or the traders, or they could have anti-Carthaginian sympathies, or philo-Greek ones, or any other tendency.⁴⁵ Since the 1980s and 1990s, however, there has been an increasing tendency to downplay or even negate the existence of processes of this kind, on the basis of the lack of evidence for policy influencing elections or of long-standing factions rooted in class.⁴⁶ Moreover, the factions at play have typically been described as being completely internal to the political scene in Rome, with other Italians playing little or no role in them. Interethnic factions are instead well attested, for instance in the case of the Magii or the Etruscan connections of the Fabii.⁴⁷ These wide-ranging connections could, at least part of the time, play a very significant role in shaping the policies and the actions of Rome as a state.

In both sides of the debate one can perceive a modernist assumption that ancient political parties would necessarily have had significantly different ideas and manifestos. If we look for well-established, organized movements

⁴³ As formulated for instance in MacMullen 1988.

⁴⁴ At least since Münzer 1920.

⁴⁵ Càssola 1962; Fronda 2010.

⁴⁶ E.g., Develin 1985.

⁴⁷ For the Magii, see p. 189; for the Fabii, see p. 121.

with clear political platforms, there can be little doubt that they never existed. However, factionalism in ancient states does not need to go beyond the level of competition among peer groups.⁴⁸ Elite factions can have very similar projects and mentalities, but they can be in virulent conflict over issues of power and control. It can be argued that the ethos of advancing one's personal prestige as well as that of one's family may well be a shared driving force among elites, but this does not necessarily make for accord and cooperation within the community.⁴⁹ Thus the observation, which has been made several times, that the Fabii seem to have favored a more northerly course of expansion, while the Claudii preferred the south, obviously does not mean that these groups believed that Rome should only have expanded in one direction.⁵⁰ It is much more likely that their private project of power relied on prior knowledge and connections with specific areas and that they accordingly tried to push the state in that direction as often as possible, knowing full well that other groups would pursue different agendas at other times. Indeed complementary agendas in rival groups would be the expectation, presumably in the belief that taken together they would have produced overall expansion, albeit in piecemeal form.⁵¹

The idea that within the Roman Republic there might have been conflicting expansionist agendas is certainly not new. It is of course reflected in the animated discussions that we know took place in the senate of matters of foreign politics and whose indirect echoes survive in the historical narratives. It has generally been agreed that such disagreements, even if they were radical ones, might have temporarily influenced the Roman actions in one direction or the other, but that they did not substantially alter the overall nature of the expansion. Moreover, especially when it comes to actual military campaigns, there is often the assumption that most factional stances were left behind once the army took to the field and the generals simply tried to win the war they were assigned to conduct. If, however, the possibility is allowed that Roman and other military leaders, whose mission objectives were vague and whose latitude was ample, could weave family or factional priorities into their action, then this means that the conquest and its outcomes could have been significantly shaped by private agendas. At least in some cases, the annual campaigns of the mid-Republic could have been geared to serve interests that were other than those of the political

⁴⁸ See for instance Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Boissevain 2013.

⁴⁹ Harris 1979: 10–41.

⁵⁰ Càssola 1962; Massa-Pairault 2001; Terrenato 2014.

⁵¹ The idea of a family-based, piecemeal imperialism has been developed by scholars working on the Venetian expansion, see for instance Morris 1980.

abstraction called Rome.⁵² In what follows, the possibility will be explored that private factions had the ability to bend temporarily the actions of the imperial machinery, so that it would also serve their own goals, in addition to (or even rather than) those of the empire as a whole.

The mechanics that made it possible for military commanders to advance their personal priorities are poorly understood and probably involved covert practices that would not necessarily be reflected in the official records. For instance, the specific commands to be given to the two army leaders were defined by the senate, and there are references to drawing lots between the two consuls to decide who would be assigned which one.⁵³ These officeholders, however, had been elected by the same factional networks of families (often changing and evolving over time) who controlled the senate, so it is unlikely that there would be any kind of true neutrality in the process. Unless factional strife prevented it, the writs could be tailored to the preferences of those who would receive them and who would then proceed to draft an army that would be amenable to their designs. Once they were in the field, the commanders were even freer to carry out their unrestricted orders however they saw fit. As long as they did not blatantly cross into a neutral state or tread on another commander's toes, they were free to conduct their campaigns and implement their strategies with little immediate oversight. Their remit was not limited exclusively to the military sphere, but it extended widely into the political and diplomatic sphere, especially in the crucial negotiations of the peace terms at the end of the campaign.⁵⁴ These treaties had then to be ratified by the senate, but it would not have been practical for them to be invalidated too often. As a result, much of the process that led to the incorporation of a community in the aftermath of military action ultimately revolved around the decisions made in the field and case-by-case by small groups of tightly interconnected elite individuals.

Mechanisms that left so much latitude to state military commanders make sense when we think that they had evolved from centuries of poorly structured seasonal raiding warfare. Before the expansion started, commanders were pointed in a general direction and expected to return with rich spoils but typically without durable political gains. For most of the fourth century BCE (and occasionally even later), expeditions of this kind

⁵² The point will be illustrated in greater detail below, but it is enough to think of cases like those of the Atilii during the First Punic War, Bleckmann 2002. The few known example must represent only the visible tip of the iceberg of a widespread phenomenon.

⁵³ This practice in itself suggests that the commanders were likely to lobby for specific assignments and tried to curb such maneuverings.

⁵⁴ Eckstein 1987. For an analysis of the nature of command, see Drogula 2007.

continued to be very frequent, alerting us to the structural proximity that existed with the budding expansion process. At times, these raiding-style commands did not even have a precise target, which demonstrates how this kind of warfare could easily be an end unto itself.⁵⁵ At other times, the orders were clearly aimed exclusively at containing and pushing back raiders from neighboring areas, especially hilly ones, illustrating how Rome's behavior in this area was entirely in line with what its peers were doing at the same time. The crucial transition that took place when the expansion started was that with increasing frequency the commanders were tasked with effecting a more permanent change in the political landscape, or, at the very least, it was tolerated that they would interpret their orders in this way.

The new developments changed the landscape within which military expeditions were taking place, creating much more interesting opportunities for the aristocrats who jockeyed their way to leadership positions, one precious year at a time. Given the great variety of possible war situations in which they could find themselves, they could advance their agendas in many different ways.⁵⁶ In those cases in which the aim was to push forth the boundaries of the state, typically by wresting control of a subsidiary center from a neighboring state, there was wide latitude, but the stakes were only marginally higher than in raids. Much more significant were the instances when there was a sense that some tangible diplomatic gain was desirable, especially vis-à-vis other urban states. Truces, peace treaties, and even surrenders could result in dramatic changes in the political map of central Italy, and could entail looting, confiscations, resettlements, enslavement, and much else.⁵⁷ Given such a broad spectrum of scenarios and possible outcomes, naturally commanders could navigate individual circumstances in a variety of ways, while still staying well within the broad parameters of their missions. Oversight from city government structures, such as the senate in Rome, was structurally limited by the practicalities of communications in the field, as well as by the lack of a reliable mechanism for independent information to reach civilian officials. Most importantly, the senators that in any particular year had remained in the city could well be in the field the next, so they would not be culturally inclined to impose tight restrictions on the commanders' actions during wartime. Even in those cases in which senatorial votes were apparently necessary, such as colonial foundations, grants of political rights, creation of tribes, and other

⁵⁵ In Roman narratives, it is usually the enemy that initiates the raid, but the Roman army often responds with counter-raids that have no durable effect.

⁵⁶ See the typology of wars outlined at pp. 147–51.

⁵⁷ See pp. 196–203.

operations affecting the political machinery, there was still considerable room for maneuver for the officials who were put in charge.⁵⁸

Especially in the case of urban states in western central and southern Italy with which there were long-standing aristocratic ties, the freedom of action that commanders enjoyed meant that they could activate their networks of factional alliance, of patronage, and of influence to pave the way for the kind of outcome that would favor them the most. They could for instance conspire with their friends and allies in the polity they were tasked to attack to gain an easier victory, in return for a preferential treatment in the context of the new diplomatic arrangements that would emerge in the aftermath of the campaign. As is the case in many political processes, there could have been a lot of back-channel negotiations that would of course been left unmentioned in the official record. Especially in the kind of warfare that prevailed at the time, in which a lot was left to mutual taunting, morale checks, and even individual fights, there was ample scope for influencing the outcome of a battle.⁵⁹ It is even conceivable that at times a preordained military defeat may have been a face-saving device for local aristocrats who wanted to reap the opportunities offered by the expansion without at the same time abdicating their warlike stance and culture. It goes without saying that the victorious generals would have had every interest in amplifying the carnage and the mayhem in their reports, which would have been nearly impossible to verify independently.⁶⁰

If really some wars could be rigged and piloted beforehand through local contacts, then obviously it was far from immaterial to the Roman commanders who they were assigned to fight. Managing to be sent to an area that they knew and were well-connected with (or perhaps even originated from) would give them an enormous advantage in the success of their schemes. Affiliated locals could also come in handy in providing a pretext to declare war in the first place. Furthermore, an army that was chosen to be loyal and willing to follow their leader in any kind of maneuvers on the field and off was another essential component of personal military success. The expansionist aristocrats who were able to choreograph effectively, directly, and through their allies, all these complicated events in the same year—namely getting elected as commanders, levying the right army, being assigned to a favorable area, arranging with their local

⁵⁸ Coles 2009. The example of Postumius Megellus' indignation at being excluded from the founding of a colony while consul is indicative, Gabrielli 2003.

⁵⁹ Oakley 1985.

⁶⁰ Auliard 2001.

partners something that looked like a great victory back home, and getting the senate to approve retroactively their actions – could reap the most spectacular fruits of the political unification. They could extract loot from those who opposed them, acquire the patronage of the newly integrated community, peddle their influence with the locals, control the political impact of the new arrangements, and much else.⁶¹ The Roman conquest of central Italy can be conceptualized as the sum total of a very great number of these state versus state interactions, manipulated by the elite networks that were able to control the transition.

In contrast with what aggressive imperialists have long maintained, the triumph and the symbolic capital that came from victory were only one layer of a far richer cake. It would be reductive to think that commanders went to the trouble and danger of leading these yearly campaigns primarily to gain the glory and loot that accompanied success on the battlefield. True, a background in military command was indispensable to an aspiring politician, but it was in itself insufficient. Victory itself was not absolutely vital, as is illustrated by the political outcomes of commanders who experienced significant defeats. It seems it was understood that schemes of this kind would not always function as planned. Indeed top Roman commanders apparently could survive having led their armies to considerable military debacles without major repercussions to their future political chances.⁶² Like their more successful peers, they could go on to have distinguished political careers afterwards, suggesting that the real source of aristocratic political power was not exclusively (or even primarily) in their pure military reputation but rather in the complex interconnections between peace treaties, patronage, citizenship grants, voting unit attributions, elections, and senate votes. All these fundamental issues were up for grabs in the crucial moment of the expansion. The very material and political structure of an empire that would last for almost a millennium were being defined in ways that would be much harder to change later.

It should be noted that, in the much rarer occasions of the larger, all-out clashes between competing expansionist movements, like the Punic or the Pyrrhic wars, the opportunities for individual jockeying by commanders were more limited, or in any case took a different form. It was true in these cases, too, that the decision to go to war could be mostly determined by factional agendas, especially on the part of families that had vested interests

⁶¹ For instance in terms of tribe stacking, see p. 180.

⁶² Rosenstein 1990.

in the conflict.⁶³ In the actual conduct of the hostilities, however, there was much less wiggle room, because there was very little overlap in the priorities of the opposing sides, making any kind of win-win arrangement virtually impossible. In other words, there was not very much that Carthaginian and Italian commanders could agree on as an outcome desirable for both. Also, changing adversary every year, as very frequently happened in the other kinds of wars, was impossible in these larger ones. Armies had to stay in the field many years and serve under different commanders. These vast, expanding coalitions of polities had to be single-minded and united militarily to a considerable extent if they wanted to prevail. These rare instances, in which already formed territorial empires went *mano-a-mano* with each other to achieve further conquest, were structurally different from the events that had led to their formation in the first place.

The Plautii in the Fourth Century

The scenario outlined so far may well appear to rely on conjecture, which in some ways is unavoidable given the under-the-table nature of some of the transactions that are being postulated here. The historical narrative developed many decades later, under radically changed political conditions, was based on dry, official yearly accounts of campaigns and laws passed in the senate. Our only hope is to look carefully for patterns of family policies that can best be explained by a framework of this kind. The recurrence of political and military actions by separate members of the same lineage has been highlighted by several studies, but its implications have not always been explored in full. The Plautii provide an extremely interesting instance, one in which it is virtually unavoidable to attribute ulterior, hidden motives to the actions they undertake, ostensibly on behalf of the Roman state.⁶⁴ Despite such blatant display of private interest, the behavior of the Plautii is in no way criticized in any of the surviving accounts, nor did they face any legal challenges, as it was the case with many other contemporary aristocrats whose ambitions were deemed pernicious and severely censured.⁶⁵ It does not follow from this that what the Plautii did was necessarily representative

⁶³ As it has been masterfully shown by Bleckmann (2002) for the First Punic War. It is worth remembering that several of the families who promoted that massive war, like the Atilii, were Campanians who had only recently become Romans.

⁶⁴ Full discussion of the Plautii in Terrenato 2014.

⁶⁵ There is a group of figures of this period that allegedly sought personal power; Mustakallio 1994; Neel 2015.

of most other peer lineages in fourth-century BCE Rome, but the examination of their case should at least broaden our perspective to the full spectrum of possible (and acceptable) aristocratic leadership behaviors.

The Plautii were a high-ranking family group that seems to have primarily originated from an area 30–40 km to the southeast of Rome, since they show up locally in inscriptions (see [Figure 5.3](#)).⁶⁶ They had attested connections in Rome and Caere, where they intermarried with the powerful Matuna lineage.⁶⁷ This suggests that they easily moved across political and ethnic boundaries within that rarefied central Italian upper-crust that had been in existence for centuries. Sometime before 358, at least a branch of the Plautii must have resettled in Rome and acquired full Roman citizenship, since this is when their first political office is recorded – a consulship, a top executive position that, among other duties, involved the command of one of the two armies fielded by Rome each year. In that year, the elected Plautius was given the mandate to fight against Priverno, a city located some 60 km southeast of Rome, a task that he performed victoriously.⁶⁸ It is of course remarkable, when compared with other empires, how newcomers to the Roman body politic could have access to the top executive office so quickly after their arrival. This was far from being a unique occurrence, but was instead a well-established practice of the budding empire. A very significant proportion of the consuls elected in this period were members of new families, often of non-Roman origin.⁶⁹ The long-standing aristocratic horizontal mobility across central Italy was clearly acquiring a new political significance at the time of the conquest.

About ten years later, another Plautius became consul, and he was elected again to the same office in 341. In his second mandate, like his predecessor, he was directed to attack Priverno, which had broken the peace treaty with Rome and was raiding neighboring cities. He won a battle, installed a garrison in the city, and confiscated two-thirds of its land.⁷⁰ In 330, however, Priverno was up in arms again, when a third Plautius happened to be consul and once more in charge of operations there. This war could not be resolved easily and continued into the following year, when a fourth Plautius was elected, was assigned to Priverno, and took over the army

⁶⁶ As attested by their probable involvement in the commissioning of a masterpiece like the Cista Ficoroni; Massa-Pairault 1992; see also Farney 2007: 43, fn 15.

⁶⁷ Cristofani 1966; Blanck and Proietti 1986.

⁶⁸ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 74 (=Liv. 7.15.9–11).

⁶⁹ The possible examples are many. Among them the Curii from Sabina, the Licinii from Etruria, the Decii from Campania, the Otacilii from Samnium; Münzer 1920: 46–97.

⁷⁰ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 111 (=Liv. 8.1.1–4).



Figure 5.3 Cylindrical copper chest from Palestrina, known as the Cista Ficoroni. Produced locally in the fourth century, it records the name of the Plautii family (Massa-Pairault 1992). It attests to their roots and connections in the area south of Rome (image courtesy of DeAgostini/Getty Images).

raised by his relative. The unruly city was finally taken by storm or by betrayal and submitted for good.⁷¹ Yet another Plautius was elected consul in 328, for the third consecutive year – a very rare occurrence even for long-established consular families like the Fabii or the Claudii.⁷²

In short, in four of the five years between 358 and 328 in which there was a Plautius as one of the consuls, Rome was tangling with Priverno and the senate happened to assign the problem to a member of the Plautii, who happened to hail from a neighboring region. Such an impossible coincidence strongly suggests that the leadership mechanism in Rome could be rigged and that there was, in all likelihood, a definite political agenda that the Plautii had concerning the state of Priverno. It is not hard to imagine that they would know the political scene there well and that they would have friends and enemies among the local aristocrats. They must have maneuvered to put themselves in the position of yielding the military power of Rome to assert their influence in an area that was very close to their interests. Their primary aim was probably to install friendly elites in leadership positions at Priverno and to add the whole community to their power base. It routinely happened that surrendering communities became part of the patronage group of the general that, as the Latin expression went, received them “in his trust.”⁷³ At this time, lineages in Rome competed for power primarily by creating and maintaining complex networks of long-term ties with various political constituencies in the city and around the empire, with particular geographical foci in certain key areas. Thus their ability to pull off repeated campaigns like the Plautii did was of essential importance.

The example of the Plautii and Priverno illustrates how, without scandal, a family group that was not even Roman was at times allowed to direct a part of the Roman imperial machinery for purposes that were closely tied to their own agenda. This does not, of course, mean that the Plautii had taken over the whole state, like a dictator would. They controlled one of the Roman armies for a few yearly war seasons, just like many other aristocratic families were doing at the same time. While the Plautii were pursuing their designs in southern Latium, others were attempting to carry out other designs elsewhere with the same means. The competition between these factional lineages was fierce, and sometimes could even be deadly, but it operated with the understanding that none of them could completely

⁷¹ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 134–37 (=Liv. 8.19–21); Oakley 1998: 602–06.

⁷² Münzer 1920, 39–47.

⁷³ See pp. 127–29.

control the system, even for a brief period. They each tried to have a turn as often as possible (the Plautii had seven in forty years!), but they did not see a factional rival prevailing as a terrible setback. After all, at the end of the day, they all benefited in some form from the sum total of the expansionist moves that were centered on the imperial capital and on the political entity they had in common. The system was designed to accommodate and integrate (if occasionally with conflict) a multitude of private agendas, and that is why groups like the Plautii were allowed to act like they did.

Crucially, however, the opposing side should not be conceptualized as being any more unified than the Roman army that fought it. In the particularly well-documented case of Priverno, we have a rare and precious glimpse into the adversaries of that particular expansionist action. In 330–329 BCE, the rebellion of the city against Rome was instigated by an aristocrat named Vitruvius Vaccus. Far from being a freedom fighter steeped in a traditional highland society, however, Vitruvius was a well-connected, rich, urban politician. He was a prominent figure in his native Fondi and, notoriously, had a luxurious house on the Palatine in Rome.⁷⁴ The primary reason for an aristocrat like him to have a house in the most distinguished neighborhood of Rome was that he wanted, just like the Plautii, to play the political game there. He therefore must have had a rival scheme to that of the Plautii, which the latter proceeded to disrupt as soon as they came to power (see [Figure 5.4](#)). His faction was clearly in power at Fondi, a nearby city that joined Priverno in the revolt (but where there was also an opposing faction, which disowned Vitruvius and delivered the city when the army of Plautius arrived).⁷⁵

It is impossible to reconstruct what the plan of Vitruvius Vaccus was, as is often the case with losing sides. In light of his deep links to Rome, is it extremely unlikely that Vitruvius advocated the secession of Fondi and Priverno from the Roman alliance, as alleged by the winning side. He must have instead been trying to parley his influence in a strategic region of central Italy for some kind of political or diplomatic advancement in Rome. The Plautii were trying to do something similar but with other means and to their benefit, and naturally the two factions clashed. In this perspective, more than a hopeless fight for an impossible independence of Priverno from Rome, the episode makes more sense as one of many struggles between aristocratic groups, both with tentacles in various states and across ethnic lines. The true bone of contention was in whose patronage

⁷⁴ Royo 1987.

⁷⁵ Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 135–36 (=Liv. 8.19.10).

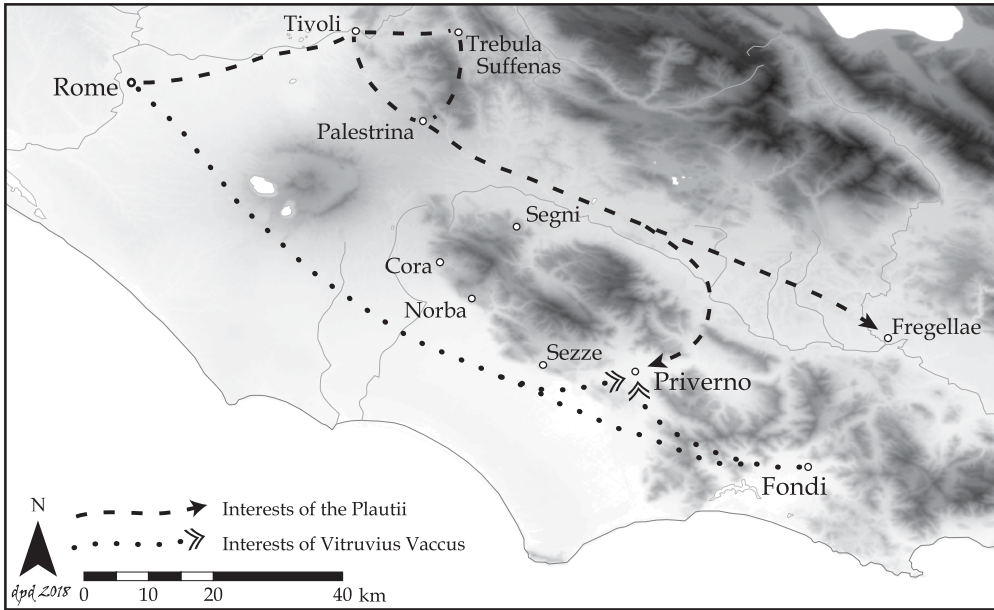


Figure 5.4 Map illustrating the connections of the Plautii family in the area southeast of Rome. The dashed line indicates their network of connections. The dotted line refers to the known connections of their adversary Vitruvius Vaccus, which touch Rome since he had a house on the Palatine (Terrenato 2014; illustration by D. Diffendale).

Priverno would be received, and consequently which lineage would reap the benefits of this particular political brokerage. The rival design of the Plautii, as illustrated by the events that followed their victory, may help us understand the kind of advancements these groups were seeking. Counterintuitively for a community that had revolted twice in recent times, Priverno avoided punishment and was even immediately given an intermediate form of citizenship by Plautius. Soon after, in 318 BCE, under the consulship of yet another Plautius, the inhabitants of Priverno probably received full Roman citizenship and were assigned to a newly constituted voting unit, the Oufentina tribe.⁷⁶ This was actually a very privileged treatment, merely ten years after a revolt, because being in a small new tribe meant that the votes from Priverno counted more than those of communities in much larger tribes.⁷⁷ If the Plautii antagonized Priverno, why did they reward it so generously? The apparent paradox is not hard to explain when considering that the city, once it no longer was under the sway of the

⁷⁶ Knapp 1980: 32. The date of the award of full citizenship is debated by some scholars.

⁷⁷ Taylor 1960.

rival Vitruvius, became very desirable as a client citizen community that could cast an influential vote for its patrons in the yearly elections. While there were dozens of such voting units in the assembly of the tribes, controlling one was a significant bargaining chip, especially for a recent and relatively small group like the Plautii.

Thanks to their somewhat blatant nature, the actions of the Plautii offer a broad perspective on the kind of tools that central Italian aristocrats able to work the Roman political system to their advantage could employ. In the year after the war with Vitruvius, another Plautius was consul, and, unsurprisingly, Rome was again busy in the same region, with the creation of a colony at Fregellae, about 20 km from Priverno. While it is not known which Roman officials were in charge of the foundation, it is hard to imagine that the Plautii had nothing to do with it, since the consul that had the command in the region was typically a commissioner for the foundation.⁷⁸ In both cases, the private interest is similar: the creation of an allied community that is under the patronage of the faction that was at the wheel of the Roman apparatus when a political transformation took place. Such an outcome was particularly desirable in the traditional region of influence of a clan. The Plautii would maintain a foothold in the area, as attested by their construction of a magnificent mausoleum at Tivoli in the first century CE.⁷⁹ Successful lineages, however, had a patchwork of patronage and alliance relationships across the whole empire. The Plautii had long-standing connections in southern Etruria, as well as in Apulia, where the city of Canosa surrendered to the Plautius consul in 318 BCE.⁸⁰ Much later, this city, too, would be attributed to the same tribe, the Oufentina. Gerrymandering schemes of this kind allowed these groups to stack one or more tribes so they could control that electoral vote. This was essential to lineage members and their friends being elected, or it could be used as a bargaining chip to influence other politicians.

This brief excursus on the concerted actions of one individual lineage within the broader process of the expansion is only exceptional because

⁷⁸ The colony of Fregellae initially received the Latin right, which means that its colonists did not have voting rights, with the possible exception of the leaders; discussion in Piper 1988; Mouritsen 1998: 99–108. It is remarkable, even if perhaps a coincidence, that when Fregellae did get full citizenship it was assigned to the Oufentina too, like Priverno.

⁷⁹ Taylor 1956. The virtual disappearance from our records of the Plautii in the third century may hint to their diminished influence. This does not mean, however, that all their maneuvers had been for nothing. They had worked at the time. The political fortunes of these smaller aristocratic groups have always been somewhat volatile. They resurfaced in any case later on; D'Emilio 1997.

⁸⁰ Fronda 2006.

of the richness and variety of the information preserved. It is the single-mindedness with which the Plautii directly pursued their agenda in the area of Priverno that makes it conspicuous for us. In most other cases, there would have been no need of repeated action, or it could have been undertaken by generals belonging to the same network but with different names. And yet several other comparable threads can be followed, perhaps less clearly and undeniably, crisscrossing the complex tapestry of the conquest. In the cases of the great families, such as the Fabii, the Claudii, or the Cornelii, their actions were so frequent and expansive that it is harder to discern patterns so clearly, and only broad areas of interest can be reconstructed.⁸¹ The importance of all these elements has been overshadowed in later narratives and discourses, both ancient and modern, which operate under the assumption that the Roman state was a monolithic entity. Focusing instead on all these family-based components, both within Rome and the other states, suggests that much of the conflict did not happen between polities but rather between factional networks that were pursuing more elaborate goals than a unification that was going to happen in any case, in one form or another. Military and diplomatic initiatives, peace treaties, surrenders, and colonial deductions were all conducted by elites of disparate ethnic provenances who were each trying to carve out a private advancement from the epoch-making macroscopic transition that they happened to live through.

The Role of Italian Elites in the Conquest

While, as several studies have demonstrated, it is not impossible to reconstruct individual family histories and interconnections, and to see their relevance for our understanding of Roman expansion, it is much more challenging to bring all these threads together in a new and comprehensive perspective. Once some established normative assumptions are discarded and the full heterogeneity of the possible situations is appreciated, it becomes difficult to speak about the process as a whole. As was the case in the [previous chapter](#), in dealing with states, and in the case of families too, a first degree of approximation can be reached by examining a cross-section of possible scenarios, and by paying attention to recurrences and types of behavior. It is also essential to place these actions in their proper long-term context, recalling that these groups were all inheritors to the aristocratic

⁸¹ E.g., Massa-Pairault 2001.

ethos that had been predominant since the early part of the first millennium BCE. For centuries before the conquest, networks of elites spanning different cities had been conspiring to overthrow civic governments and replace them with friendlier ones. Private armies were regularly raised and fought with each other as well as with state ones, led by warlords that easily crossed political and ethnic boundaries to head shifting coalitions.⁸² In the time of the expansion, these patterns of behavior, rather than disappearing as obsolete vestiges of a primitive past, were adapted to the changed situation and acquired a new scope and significance.⁸³ The same kind of strategies could be employed for more permanent transformations at a time when the changed political contingency offered unprecedented opportunities.

Under the broad banner provided by the Roman conquest, elite networks at this point had the opportunity of expanding and solidifying their patronage and influence spheres like never before. In the old times, what the Plautii did at Priverno would have taken the form of a temporary coup, like the one supposedly carried out at Gabii by Roman and northern Etruscan leaders at the end of the sixth century.⁸⁴ Now instead a Roman military expedition, led by a Latin family with Etruscan connections against one with connections in Rome, Fondi, and Priverno, resulted in a long-lasting political rearrangement, as well as in the growth of the overall empire, of course. Just like their predecessors, the Plautii did not fight to defend or attack a political abstraction, or to acquire loot or means of production. Something different and potentially more important was at stake. Their actions would determine which elite network would be able to count the leaders of the city of Priverno, which was arguably falling into the orbit of Rome anyway, among their clients. Whoever founded the colony of Fregellae would gain a permanent group of clients and supporters there. The outcomes of these disputes would influence the political balance of the new empire for generations to come. Establishing patronage, stacking tribes, and eliminating local opponents had effects that were felt centuries after the fact, and it is over these key factors that the struggle raged hardest and bloodiest. In this sense, it could be provocatively argued that there was more violence over the way in which the expansion would happen rather than over whether the expansion itself would take place or not. The global process was in the cards anyway and the conflict was between those who were trying to carve out for their lineage groups a bigger piece of the pie than this unique opportunity offered.

⁸² Rawlings 1999; Armstrong 2016.

⁸³ Critique in Terrenato 2007a.

⁸⁴ Martínez-Pinna 2009.

An analogous deconstruction to the one applicable to the actions of the Roman elites can be employed to analyze the behavior of their peers in the other central Italian states. Just as Roman expansion can arguably be described as a patchwork of factional projects, opposition to it should not be taken automatically as resistance on the part of ethnic or political groups desperately struggling for independence. Within each of the many communities that ended up in the Roman Empire were a variety of possible agendas and strategies, each, generally speaking, aimed at advancing the power of a specific family, or, at least, at ensuring its survival. Breaking down the expansion process in central Italy from all sides makes room for a much wider range of responses on the part of non-Romans. If instead of a single-minded, implacable, exclusively Roman onslaught we envisage a series of multilateral, interethnic elite interactions, resulting in ad hoc solutions, it is easier to accept that there were ways in which other Italians could have had a significant impact on how the process unfolded. Rather than being limited to the classic polar antithesis between acceptance and resistance,⁸⁵ in this new perspective non-Roman participants in the integration would have been able to deploy a wide variety of sophisticated political behaviors that would have a measurable effect on its eventual outcomes.

The variability of strategies that were adopted by aristocratic lineages in the states at the time when they were entering the new territorial aggregation can be illustrated with a few representative examples. In the case of the Plautii we have seen one possible (and fairly popular) path. It involved relocating at least a branch of the lineage to Rome to engage in the political game there at the highest levels. This typically built on existing ties with the local nobility that could facilitate their horizontal move without loss of rank as well as citizenship rights.⁸⁶ The obvious intent was to share as much as possible in the benefits generated by the expansionist project centered there. It was also evidently a bet on its success over other competitors, as well as a preference for the conditions offered by it to outsiders. Rome was not the only expansion hub at this time and elites had a choice of which bandwagon to join. Once settled, the plan was naturally to accumulate and yield influence in the decision-making and the conduction of imperialist operations. Running successfully for office and being chosen as senate members were the main goals, and the machinery of the Roman republic made them realistic objectives. Election to the highest office, the consulship, enabled them to march back into central Italy at the head of a powerful federal army that

⁸⁵ Typical of the discourse in some provincial contexts, e.g., Webster and Cooper 1996.

⁸⁶ Münzer 1920, 39–47.

was handpicked by them and was subject to very limited state oversight. This offered them opportunities for family advancement that would have been inconceivable in their communities of origin.⁸⁷

Even if our knowledge of family histories and provenances is extremely fragmentary and incomplete, enough survives to say that once the expansion got in motion in the fourth century BCE the number of outside lineages that managed to enter and succeed in the political fray in Rome increased very significantly. The geographic distribution of their provenances illustrates well the scope of the vast elite networks that were converging on Rome. Culturally similar Latium was of course very well represented, but so were Etruria and Campania, whose background was very diverse. It is clear that at the core of the new alliance there was the thickly urbanized western coast of central Italy, which had been on a parallel developmental course since the beginning of the millennium. But a smaller number of families hailed from the whole range of the Apennine hills and highlands, and later from the eastern coast and the south.⁸⁸ There is practically no area of peninsular Italy that was not represented as the point of departure for this early wave of elites who decided to cast their lot with Rome before it was obvious that it would prevail on all others.⁸⁹ While, for some, geographical proximity was certainly a factor, for many others the choice must have been motivated by the nature and character of the Roman expansionist bid. The frequency with which this strategy was adopted must have played as big a role in the success of the expansion as any military victory over other Italians.

As a result of elites relocating there from all Italy, Rome rapidly became a crucial arena in which the power struggle between central Italian aristocrats was played out, challenging the primacy of the traditional Roman families and eliciting some pushback. The lineages that had been in Rome for centuries tried to retain a home turf advantage that the others understandably wanted to erode. There was a closed order of nobility, the patriciate, which the newcomers were not allowed to enter and to which originally many offices and priesthoods were reserved. All those not belonging to the patriciate were automatically classed as plebeians and were originally ineligible for most offices. During the early phases of the expansion, however, there was a movement that succeeded in reducing drastically the

⁸⁷ Wiseman 1971 offers an overview.

⁸⁸ Panciera 1982; Caldelli and Gregori 2014.

⁸⁹ The main exception to this rule is represented by Greek groups in southern Italy and Sicily. For them, it is virtually impossible to trace the path of local elites entering the Roman political game; Lomas 1993. This may be in part an artifact of the lack of family names in the Greek system of personal names, which makes it very hard to establish lineage connections.

prerogatives of the patriciate, opening all offices, except a few priesthoods, to the plebeians. This epoch-making reform has typically been interpreted as aimed at including Roman lower classes.⁹⁰ When the ethnic origins of many plebeian beneficiaries is considered, however, like the Latin Fulvii and Plautii, the Etruscan (or Etruscan-linked) Genucii, the Campanian Atilii, the Sabine Curii, the Samnite Otacilii (to mention only some of those whose provenance can be reasonably conjectured), a different picture emerges.⁹¹

In short, the tension between patricians and plebeians (sometimes dubbed the Struggle of the Orders) largely opposes aristocrats of similar rank but of different origin, and would thus be over the terms of participation of incorporated non-Roman elites in the government of the new empire.⁹² In this sense, it is particularly significant that some key political actors in promoting the reform process, like the Licinii, were of non-Roman origins (in this case, Etruscan) and so understandably had the interests of people like them at heart.⁹³ Once the elite playing field in Rome was almost completely leveled, by the mid-fourth century, all these lineages could get busy creating complex and constantly shifting political networks in the new capital, with the agreement of the local patrician nobility, who ultimately would much rather open their circles to foreign peers than to the lower classes of Rome itself (or of anywhere else, of course). This process had an importance that can hardly be overstated, despite its being rarely considered in explanations for the success of Roman imperialism. It meant that the agency of other Italians elites in the end was at least as important as that of the old families of Rome.

The convergence of Italian elites on Rome was undoubtedly a key requisite for an expansion centered there to be successful. But it does not automatically mean that the communities left by these resettling aristocrats were (or became) a periphery for that reason. The people on the move were far from immigrants in the modern sense of the word, seeking a better life or a social promotion. Rather they were elite groups that made use of a well-established practice of horizontal mobility to seize the opportunities opened up by the emergence of a new system of territorial empires. For

⁹⁰ E.g., Richard 1978.

⁹¹ Münzer 1920: 46–97; a fascinating reconstruction is now proposed for the Latin Manlii, whose factional priorities could be evinced from a close reading of the narrative concerning the downfall of Manlius Capitolinus; Meunier 2019.

⁹² Armstrong 2016: 7; see discussion in Hölkeskamp 1993.

⁹³ The Licinii name seem to correspond to Etruscan *lecne*, as attested, among others, by a bilingual inscription; Ogilvie 1976: 50; Farney 2010: 128.

this, they were even at times willing to accept a reduction of extremely exalted social positions that they enjoyed at home.⁹⁴ In most cases, they did not abandon their polities of origin completely, but rather tried to make them part of their patronage network and political constituency. Their keen interest in their homelands is demonstrated by cases in which their action as Roman magistrates was directed at them, as well as by acts of munificence or the presence of family tombs. In this sense, their move to Rome was, among other things, a strategy aimed at obtaining even more clout in their original communities. It is also telling that there were branches of these lineages, perhaps cadet ones, that frequently remained locally based. Straddling the emerging imperial capital and their traditional power base placed these elites in a very favorable position to benefit by the great transformations that were afoot. Indeed, in the incorporation of many Italian communities within the alliance, a key role was often played precisely by those groups that had a foothold both in Rome and at home. Rather than as a betrayal of their states of origin (which would be an anachronistic concept), the actions of these families should be seen as successful attempts at positioning themselves as political brokers within the new power structure. They could offer to the locals representation in Rome, and at the same time offer to the Roman government local knowledge and contacts.

The case of Italian elites joining the Roman aristocratic scene at an early stage is in some ways the least invisible to us, thanks to the survival of consular lists and other historical material in Rome. The trajectory of elites that chose different paths is much harder to reconstruct and categorize. One option that was clearly chosen by many was to remain in their state of origin and maneuver to influence its dealings with Roman magistrates through diplomacy, patronage, and friendship links. In this way, they too had a chance to reap brokerage benefits like those who had moved to Rome. A lot of these contacts would have happened under the table, leaving little trace for us. But especially when the negotiations became tense, a glimpse could be opened into the mechanisms at work. Especially at the moment of incorporation, threats, stand-offs, and even open conflict with Rome could take place, but this would only be one of the many forms that elite interactions could take. This is well illustrated by the case of the Fulvii from the Latin city of Tusculum. In the late fourth century BCE, L. Fulvius Curvus was a consul there and led Tusculum in a confrontation with Rome that threatened to become violent, breaking an existing peace treaty between the two states. The outcome of this difficult moment, however, makes it

⁹⁴ As the case of the Cilnii at Arezzo or the Marcii at Tusculum; see pp. 143–44.

clear that there is more to it than a conflict between an expanding power and its possible prey. War in the event was avoided and a deal was brokered by Fulvius, who the very following year was elected consul in Rome, probably with the help of the Fabii.⁹⁵ Surprisingly by modern standards, his very recent rebelliousness was not at all held against him, presumably because it was understood by all that this was an acceptable behavior for an aristocratic group in this situation.

Thus the revolt of Tusculum should be interpreted as a very hard negotiation over the terms of the alliance, and especially over the role that Fulvii would have in it.⁹⁶ Interestingly, a triumph by Fulvius over his hometown of Tusculum was recorded. This appears to be incongruous because no actual major warfare seems to have taken place, and in any case Fulvius would have been the enemy commander! If true, this event shows how fluid and permeable the lines between states were in the confrontation and how military honors (and the military sphere more generally) were inextricably enmeshed with diplomatic and other nonviolent activities. Clearly, this was an extremely delicate moment for the Fulvii, one in which their fate hung in the balance between great aristocratic advancement in the capital and the utter ruin that befell Vitruvius. The deciding factor was not whether Tusculum as a state would win a war with Rome (which was in any case an unlikely outcome) but rather whether the interstate network linking the Fulvii and the Fabii (and their other friends) could prevail over its adversaries in both states.⁹⁷ As it happens, their strategy worked, and thus we are informed about it. Tusculum became more closely integrated in the empire and continued to enjoy full Roman citizenship, while the Fulvii triumphantly entered the ranks of Roman aristocracy through the main gate. Once this difficult transition was managed, the Fulvii went on to become one of the leading Roman republican clans. They always maintained an interest in Tusculum,⁹⁸ as one of their areas of patronage. Their move to Rome, however, allowed them to use the new empire as a vehicle for access to the global Mediterranean scene in ways that were unthinkable even for the kings of a small state. Indeed the Fulvii would go on to play a very significant role in the Punic wars and in the expansion in the eastern Mediterranean, becoming famously cosmopolitan connoisseurs of Greek culture (see [Figure 5.5](#)).⁹⁹

⁹⁵ The Fabii may well have choreographed the entire process with the help of their friends the Fulvii; Forsythe 2005: 271.

⁹⁶ Münzer 1920, 63–64; Farney 2007: 44–45; Syme 2016: 26–43.

⁹⁷ As already observed in Arnold 1868: 209.

⁹⁸ Licordari 1982: 49.

⁹⁹ Gruen 1984a: 203.



Figure 5.5 Inscription of M. Fulvius Nobilior, a Roman general who successfully campaigned in Greece in the early second century BCE, taking the city of Ambracia mentioned in the text (Walther 2016). The Fulvii were a non-Roman elite family who had been admitted into the highest echelons of Roman society in the fourth century (illustration by D. Diffendale).

The case of the Fulvii illustrates how being in power within a state that was negotiating (or renegotiating) its incorporation into an empire was another very effective strategy for a non-Roman elite lineage. It gave great prominence to the family and offered great opportunities for brokerage, but it also came with terrible dangers. If the hard bargaining and posturing devolved into actual conflict, it could lead to the complete downfall of that lineage, as was the fate of Vitruvius, whose initial position at Priverno must have been analogous to that of Flavius at Tusculum.¹⁰⁰ Vitruvius may have overplayed his hand, or in any case the Plautii made it impossible for him to reach a negotiated deal, thus precipitating his demise. Once again, the network of friendship between lineages was essential to the success of

¹⁰⁰ Torelli 2017.

these kinds of delicate political maneuvers. The most important implication for the thesis presented in this book, at any rate, is that the polar opposition between imperialists in Rome and freedom fighters elsewhere completely misrepresents the nature of the conflict. Peer, cosmopolitan elite groups on all sides were trying to direct a global process to their benefit, without great clashes about abstract ideological principles like independence or expansion, but with ruthless (and sometimes very bloody) struggles over actual power and influence. The Fulvii were clever, well-connected, or lucky enough to succeed spectacularly at this game, and, as a result, they were able to make a seamless transition from local magnates to oligarchs at the top of a Mediterranean-wide empire.

The easy, fluid turning of coats apparent in the examples discussed thus far should not surprise anyone or be seen as exceptional or morally deplorable. What in nationalist states amounts to high treason and is severely punished was entirely acceptable in the world of small Italian polities. Elites could move horizontally from one state to another even during open conflict between the two. In fact, it was precisely times of confrontations and wars that a well-timed defection could have the highest bargaining value, as well as involve the greatest risk. A considerable number of military actions against cities in the period were resolved with the opening of gates to the enemy by parties inside the city. Priverno itself offers an example, but the same happens during the siege of Falerii and on many other occasions.¹⁰¹ These shifts were not always going in the same direction either. While of course Roman historians emphasized defections to Rome, the Romans themselves were not immune from this practice. The romanticized story of Coriolanus could well allude to events of this kind.¹⁰²

Another possible strategy that non-Roman elites could take was to stay put in their traditional areas much longer, throughout the duration of the conquest. From there they could take part in the incorporation process, like the families discussed above, but they would not move to Rome but only have connections there and in other parts of the alliance. Their main center of gravity would remain where it had always been. A good example here is offered by the Magii, known from Oscan inscriptions from Campania and Samnium as early as the third century BCE. Their primary seat appears to have been the powerful city of Capua, a close ally of Rome. When the city dramatically abandoned the Roman alliance to join the Carthaginian side during the Second Punic War, however, they were faced with a difficult

¹⁰¹ Terrenato 2004a.

¹⁰² Adam and Rouveret 1990; for the many times that trust (*fides*) was broken on either side, Burton 2011: 250–332.

choice. The head of the lineage at the time was Decius Magius, who had advocated staying with the Romans, even after the crushing defeats inflicted on them by Hannibal. The city government decided otherwise, however, and he had to flee, finding refuge at the court of the kings of Egypt, a neutral state where he safely awaited the war's outcome. When Rome emerged victorious from its mortal struggle, Magius would come back to reap the rewards of his correct political and military betting. The Magii received full Roman citizenship, but it would not have been a good idea to go back to Capua, because its state structure had been dismantled in punishment for its defection.¹⁰³ Having access to and clout in a local city government was another important political tool for families like the Magii, so they moved their seat to nearby Aeclanum, a smaller center in the Samnite hills, where they presumably already had a foothold, maintaining a presence in Capua at the same time (see [Figure 4.6](#)). This is one more example of how cities were largely interchangeable vehicles for tentacular groups.

It is important to note that when the Magii left Capua, they could have very easily moved to Rome on the strength of their citizenship rights and their friends there. They evidently calculated, unlike the Fulvii, that it was better for them to be the biggest fish in a local pond community than one of many elite groups in Rome. The Roman alliance remained their primary political framework, however, since a century later they chose not to participate in the Samnite-led anti-Roman movement that precipitated the Social War.¹⁰⁴ Finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time again, the Magii found ways to adhere to their established system of alliances. Their leader, Minatius Magius, raised a private army and fought on the Roman side, exemplifying again how private warfare was always a possibility, especially when the state one belonged to openly adopted an unacceptable political stance.¹⁰⁵ Having correctly picked the winners again, the Magii took this opportunity to move to Rome. There, with the help of the Roman generals they had helped, the sons of Minatius become magistrates. Perhaps not coincidentally, a grandson of his would become prefect of Egypt, renewing the connection with that distant land that existed in the time of Decius. When we imagine a Campanian aristocrat sitting out the Second Punic War in Alexandria and debating in Greek with a presumably intrigued Hellenistic monarch the pros and cons of returning to Italy, it is evident that the elites who did not decide immediately (or even at all) to move to the capital were

¹⁰³ See pp. 130–33.

¹⁰⁴ Salmon 1989.

¹⁰⁵ Santangelo 2007: 67–70.

not necessarily marginal, an expression of backward provincialism. Many of them were instead cosmopolitan princes who were carefully studying the convulsions of the central Mediterranean and trying to keep their houses out of trouble and, if possible, ahead of the game.

Trajectories like that of the Magii must have been much more common than we tend to think. The Magii are particularly visible in historical terms in part because a Roman historian (whose work is preserved) descended from an intermarriage between them and the Vellei of Capua.¹⁰⁶ He obviously had an interest in telling the story of his family, especially since it helped establish his credentials as a member of staunchly philo-Roman Italian elites. Attitudes comparable to that of the Magii can be evinced in many other cases. As late as the first century BCE, for instance, many high-ranking northern Etruscan aristocrats considered acquiring Roman citizenship and moving to Rome as a demotion of their status.¹⁰⁷ They evidently preferred to enjoy their exalted rank at home, while cultivating links with their peers in Rome and other capitals. Such was the case of the Cilnii of Arezzo, who claimed former regal status and who came to Rome only at the beginning of the first century BCE (like the Magii) more than two hundred years after the Roman army had restored them to power in their home state. Another example is offered by the Caecinae, the dominant family of Volterra, who started their political career in Rome even later, at the beginning of the first century CE, when the expansion process was over and their community had been incorporated for a long time.¹⁰⁸ These latecomers enjoyed no less fortune than early converts like the Plautii. Cilnius Maecenas would of course become the trusted spin doctor of the first emperor Augustus, while the Caecinae produced acclaimed generals and consuls. The opportunities offered by a move to Rome may have changed in nature over time, but they remained always open to enterprising Italian aristocrats.

Conclusions

Making room for a variety of agency options for central Italian elites in the time of the conquest can help make better sense of some apparently peculiar aspects of the expansion process. Rather than a relatively small number of Italian state polities, the main actors can be the multitude of

¹⁰⁶ Camodeca 1982, 13; Connal 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Harris 1971b.

¹⁰⁸ Bruun 1975; Terrenato 1998b; Tweedie 2015.

ambitious aristocratic families whose shifting networks crisscrossed the peninsula in every direction. Old Romans, new Romans, and non-Romans all participated in this extremely complex game for centuries, playing on a reasonably level field that placed landed aristocrats of all stripes on the same plane, while it tended to exclude the lower classes. Vertical social mobility certainly did take place, especially in Rome and other major economic hubs, but it did not substantially change the landscape of power. When the global central Mediterranean system became ripe for the emergence of territorial empires, the aristocrats realigned their well-tested machinations to the new goal of exploiting of the process for their private advantage. Caring little for the destiny of any specific state and much about that of their own lineage, they weaved in and out of the various political systems, jumped on passing bandwagons, and jockeyed for position, all the while trying to stay on the winning side. The Roman army grew into a supra-state entity that could be incarnated and directed in many different ways, and whose leadership positions were up for grabs every year. When conditions were right, it could be commandeered as a tool for family advancement by scores of Italian families, who used its brute force alongside threats, diplomacy, patronage, and many other forms of overt and covert interaction. Collectively, such myriad moves by elites tended to bring existing Italian states much more closely together, and produced what we call Roman Italy.

The role of Rome in the transition is of course a unique one, but not necessarily in the terms that nationalist scholarship has tended to construe. Old Romans, namely elite families that were attested in Rome before the conquest, were quickly and vastly outnumbered by newcomers. While it is true that some of them, like the Fabii, the Cornelii, and the Claudii,¹⁰⁹ enjoyed for centuries an unrivaled prominence and a sustained sense of precedence and higher rank, it cannot be forgotten that they were quickly joined by dozens of peers who had converged on their city from everywhere. In this way, the old Romans had to abandon any hope of having the tight grip on their own city that other aristocrats continued to have on cities like Arezzo or Aeclanum. As a result, Rome completely lost its original nature of city-based state, essentially to become a neutral arena for aristocratic factionalism from all over Italy. No other polity suffered this fate, and the prolonged good fortune of some of its early elites should not overshadow the profound effect that this unparalleled denaturation would have.

Rome appears at this point as a vehicle for political clustering that could be directed and appropriated by an ever-growing number of trans-ethnic

¹⁰⁹ Who themselves had arrived only a century before.

factions. So it is not just a provocation to wonder if calling the expansion Roman really has the meaning that we traditionally attribute to it. Was Rome a small state that spread its power in all directions, or did Rome become instead a mere central tool to be used by everybody else to accomplish their purposes, and which alone completely lost its original identity in the process? More evidence needs to be reviewed before an answer to these momentous questions can be attempted; but the contribution made by the study of family biographies is a powerful reminder that when historians underestimate the global effect of private agendas and motivations, they run the risk of creating an unrealistic narrative populated by animated political abstractions instead of real people. The possibility should be considered that the aggregate effect of a multitude of self-serving behaviors on the part of a wide array of central Italian clans was the creation of a unified territorial empire that was Roman primarily in the choice of its capital. The emergence of this new geopolitical structure favored the landed Italian elite class, despite the acrimonious factionalism that had always affected it, catapulting it, probably beyond its wildest imagination, to global domination.

Introduction

So far this book has examined the preconditions, the broader contingencies, and especially the ways in which the expansion actually happened. Crucial to completing the radically different redefinition that is attempted here is the consideration of what actually happened in central and southern Italy in the aftermath of the conquest (see [Figure 6.1](#)). In many areas, it is precisely the evidence relative to the material conditions that existed once the communities had been incorporated that makes the conjectures advanced in the last two chapters much more plausible. What may appear to be far-fetched and untestable hypotheses about backroom dealings, factional negotiations, and non-Roman agency become far more realistic once elements such as elite continuity, land tenure patterns, and production are taken into full account. This is certainly not a new method, since certain perceived outcomes of Roman imperialism have always been deemed highly relevant to any interpretation of the phenomenon as a whole. For instance, the establishment of Roman military control, or the appearance of Roman roads, have typically been invoked to support the received view that the conquest was purely the result of coordinated state action by Rome. Stock theories about the Romanization of Italy left to non-Romans only a very passive role of more or less willing receptors of Roman power structures, modes of production, and culture. While the motivations for Roman actions have claimed and still claim the lion's share of the discussion, aggressive and defensive imperialists typically agree that the result of the process was a peninsula that was eventually homogenized along Roman standards. The circular reasoning in this long-standing approach is fairly evident. Since the conquest was Roman, the diffusion of supposedly Roman elements is highlighted, and since Italy as a result appears thoroughly Roman, so the conquest must have been too.

In addition to the deeply rooted ideological reasons that for centuries informed Western historiography regarding the nature of Roman expansion, a selective approach to the evidence has helped cement the dominant perspective. The absolute dominance of the written historical record, as

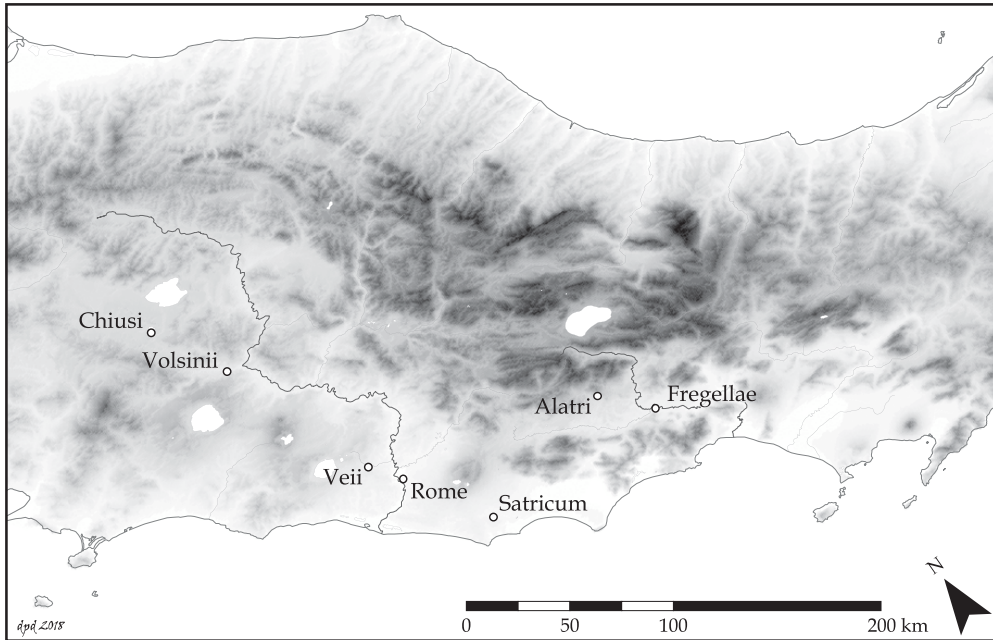


Figure 6.1 Map of Italy with the locations mentioned in [Chapter 6](#) (illustration by D. Diffendale).

well as the priority given to monumental public construction, has naturally conspired to produce a one-sided image. Another issue is that supposed consequences of the conquest have been traced too far in time, down to the first century CE and beyond, long after the conquest took place. Such a teleological approach relies on very doubtful causal connections between a political transformation and a material development that are separated by hundreds of years and many complex intervening events and processes. In this perspective, Italian politics, economy, society, and culture have often tended to be evaluated in modern nationalist terms, downplaying the specificity of that complex system of small states and other polities interacting for centuries before their unifications. It is only recently that other datasets, primarily coming from new archeological fieldwork, from detailed studies of private epigraphy, from history of religions, from finer grained architectural history, and from innovative reinterpretations of the historical and legal texts, are eroding the dominant views from different sides. A much greater attention is finally being paid to non-Roman attitudes and policies. They should be considered on equal footing with Roman ones, without necessarily assuming that the conquerors were omnipotent and could do what they wanted with all the other Italians. Similarly, when economic

and social production and exchange are studied more closely, it becomes clear that they did benefit non-Roman as well as Romans. The results of all these new and exciting research activities, however, are only partially being integrated together to produce a comprehensive reconsideration of the whole phenomenon. Links and causal chains still need to be connected across different approaches and disciplinary fields. Long-held views still need to be deconstructed. This chapter attempts to make a contribution in this sense.

Evaluating the material impact of the unification of central and southern Italy involves a further extreme synthesizing effort, within the framework of an already very compendious book. Each of the areas touched upon could be (and often has been) the subject of an entire book, making it impossible to argue each point in full detail. At the same time, a comprehensive, holistic review of the available evidence is unavoidable in any attempt to present a global reinterpretation of such a complex phenomenon. To keep things within reasonable limits, the focus is on people, goods, power, and economy, with little or no space left to cultural issues such as language, law, architecture, or art. It is arguable that these latter manifestations, especially since they often largely overlap with elite behaviors and tastes, provide a more limited and less diagnostic perspective than the material infrastructure. Obviously, in all premodern societies the two areas were thoroughly embedded in each other, thus separating them is somewhat theoretically questionable, but cannot be avoided. It will have to be enough to say that an interpretation of the cultural implications of the conquest that goes hand in hand with the historical model proposed here is far from impossible.¹ The processes affecting Italy at this time were tightly interconnected to one another and cannot be easily disentangled. Indeed precisely the heterogeneity illustrated so far makes it very hard to produce effective generalizations. In organizing the overview contained in this chapter, the most immediate and direct of the apparent consequences of the conquest are discussed first, followed by the Roman policies in the incorporated lands, and ending with more indirect effects on the economy and society.

Slaughter and Looting

In most analysis of the impact of Roman expansion, a large space is made for the violence and destruction that were immediately associated with

¹ A brief version of my views on this whole complex issue can be found in Terrenato 2008. I may return to this in a book-length treatment in the future.

military conflict. In addition to the soldier casualties in the field, there would be civilian ones when settlements were captured and looted. Prisoners could be executed or enslaved, property destroyed or taken as spoils. Since war is often assumed to have been the default incorporation process for most communities, the resulting picture is one of wholesale disruption and transferral of resources to Rome.² If, however, we accept what was argued previously, that conflict was not generalized or uniformly distributed across Italy, but rather affected nonurban communities disproportionately, it follows that the same was true for the violence connected with it.³ Additionally, it needs to be observed that a large majority of the yearly military operations were limited to raids and pitched battles in the countryside. The storming of major cities was extremely rare, and sieges even more so. The taking of subsidiary centers was, on the other hand, more common. Unless one of these events happened, it was very unusual for the Roman army to enter the walls, and even less to be allowed to loot, a major city. This was a treatment that was instead common for farms and villages.⁴ Again, once the exceptional instance of Veii is put in its proper place, it should be remembered that very few other rich Italian cities were stormed, sieged, or sacked in this period (see [Figure 6.2](#)). A few instances are attested in those rare wars that were fiercely fought, like those against the Samnites and the Gauls, or in cases of serious betrayal of the alliance.⁵ They often affect minor centers. Other sacks are directed at sapping the strength and capabilities of competing imperialist projects.⁶ In other words, looting was not primarily aimed at the greatest accumulations of wealth, as argued by aggressive imperialists, but rather at those opponents who were deemed incompatible with or alternative to the expansion. Just like war, war-related violence was disproportionally aimed at highland peoples or antithetical coalitions, with whom, incidentally, there were far fewer personal interconnections.

The most extreme form of violence was of course when prisoners and civilians were put to death, either after a battle or after the capture of a settlement. Mass executions of this kind were rare and often appear connected with the intent to punish some kind of betrayal of existing

² The examples are countless, Crawford 1978; Harris 1979; David 1994.

³ See pp. 150–53.

⁴ Fabia 1903; Frank 1933: 43; Harris 1979: 58–60.

⁵ Some examples are: the sack of treasonous Lucera in 320, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 181 (=Liv. 9.15.7–8); the sack of Samnite Bojano in 311, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 202–03 (=Liv. 9.31); the fate of the Senones in 284, Paci 2002.

⁶ Examples of sacks are the late third-century cases of Carthago Nova or Taranto, Ziolkowski 1995. Completely different is the case of Volsinii, see pp. 149–50.

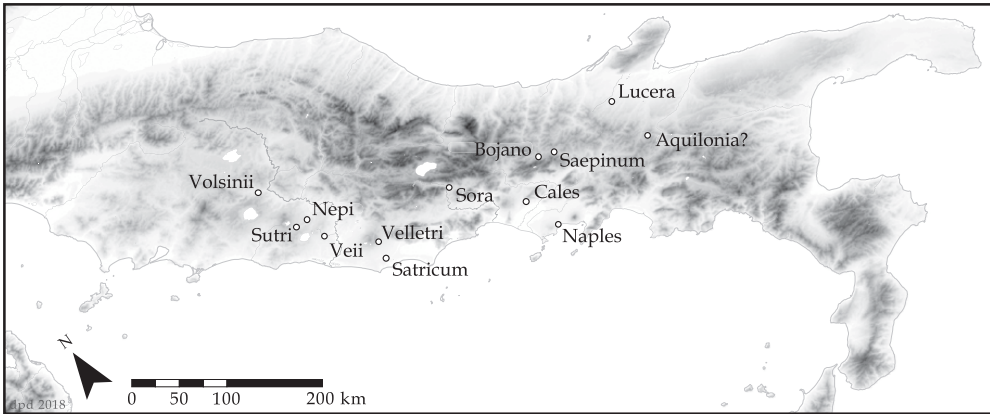


Figure 6.2 Map showing the distribution of Italian cities looted during the conquest period. It is notable how none but a few of the richest centers of the west coast were ever sacked, while many upland smaller places were (based on Harris 1979; illustration by D. Diffendale).

treaties.⁷ Battle prisoners were somewhat more likely to meet this harsh treatment, but in many cases the numbers given in the historical accounts are likely to have been exaggerated.⁸ Generals who submitted reports after their return would have had an obvious interest in inflating the numbers of casualties inflicted on the enemy, especially since there appears to have been a minimum of five thousand that was required for a triumph to be awarded. For this reason, numbers of battle deaths have often been questioned, but this was not often the case for executions in cold blood. In this perspective, caution should be applied even with those rare narratives stating that an entire adult male population was put to the sword.⁹ The targets were likely to be men that could bear arms, thus in a certain age group and above a certain social level. Among other considerations, the wanton killing of prisoners destroyed wealth that could be obtained from ransoming them, selling them into slavery, or freeing them and having them as grateful clients.¹⁰ The killings that did happen may have been rooted in the traditional sacrificing of elite prisoners, a custom that was

⁷ E.g., the slaughters that followed the recapture of Nepi in 386, a colony that had gone over to the Etruscans (where there was a pro-Roman faction); Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 14 (=Liv. 6.10.5–6); overview in Wickham 2014: 39–43; also Gillett 2010.

⁸ E.g., the 30,000 Samnite prisoners that would have been slaughtered in 345. The number appears to be a recurring figure in these narratives; Oakley 1998: 350.

⁹ For instance, the cases of retaliation at Lucera in 320 (see footnote 5) and Cluviae in 311, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 202 (=Liv. 9.31.2–4).

¹⁰ Discussion in Eilers 2002; Wickham 2014.

particularly well attested among the Etruscans.¹¹ And indeed eliminating some or all of the aristocrats in a community could undermine resistance, especially if the anti-Roman faction was primarily targeted, a policy that is explicitly attested in some instances and could have been more common than is usually thought. In the many cases in which the Roman army was helped by an internal faction, it would be hard to imagine that such supporters would suffer a harsh fate.¹² In a way, such practices followed in the tradition of hostility and feuding between lineages, who constantly sought opportunities to eliminate the opposing leadership, thus leaving the enemy without its most representative individuals. The actual wiping out of an entire community, on the other hand, was a very different and unprecedented action, one that required an exceptional amount of energy and motivation and would have deep repercussions on the public image of those who engaged in it.

The generalized continuity of traditional burials and local cults in many communities that had been violently annexed supports the view that killings were not indiscriminately applied everywhere.¹³ Elites and commoners were able to survive these violent times without any major visible material impact. The actual executions, however, would have had a key symbolic and political significance, sending an important signal to other communities facing difficult decisions, with factions pulling in different directions. Building on an older established practice, it was possible for Roman generals to eliminate or weaken hostile groups within states that were being incorporated, leaving in place friendly ones. At the same time, it was essential to honor surrenders and avoid the appearance of unnecessary cruelty, which would have made future opponents fight to the end. All in all, there is no real indication that war-related killings affected the demography of the incorporated communities (or of Rome and its allies) in any significant way. Just as it is likely that in actual warfare the symbolic and ritualized elements accounted for more than is normally reckoned, the same may well have been true in the case of the executions.

Serious damage to the material infrastructure of conquered cities was also very rare, not surprisingly given the scarcity of sieges and sacks. The

¹¹ Torelli 1981a; De Grummond 2016.

¹² Among others, Nepi in 386 (see footnote 7); Priverno in 329, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 137 (=Liv. 8.20.10–11); Satricum in 319 Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 183 (=Liv. 9.16.10), Lucera in 314, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 196 (=Liv. 9-26.2–3); all cases in which it is explicitly said that a specific hostile faction within the defeated city was targeted.

¹³ It is enough to mention the case of Perugia, whose elite tombs continued despite the crushing defeat of 310, with its alleged mass enslavements and killings; Cencioli 2011; Benelli 2015.

fate of Veii is again a distant outlier, as virtually all other cities continued their existence after their annexation. The rare cases of destruction appear concentrated in subsidiary centers and on the highlands, just as in the case of killings. These smaller fortified places played an important role in the raiding warfare waged by Samnites and others. Their elimination would therefore bring real benefits in the curbing of their activities, which was one of the goals of the expansion.¹⁴ There are only a few cases that involve larger cities, and they often are connected with coastal raiding peoples or with defections.¹⁵ In the two notorious instances of Volsinii and Falerii, major centers were moved from highly defensible positions to more open ones. In both cases, the relocation appears to be more the result of complex interactions between local aristocrats and Roman generals than to the sheer destructiveness of war. And again, the continuity of traditional elite burials at both sites after the event speaks against its extreme disruptiveness.¹⁶ Rome itself had survived being sacked by Gauls in the early fourth century BCE with little archeologically visible harm to its architecture. It is again far more likely that the damage was more symbolic than structural. City walls and gates, council halls, and public residences were the obvious targets for actions that inflicted a blow more to the self-image of the city than to its actual urban landscape.¹⁷ Main temples (e.g., at Satricum) were often spared, because of the respect they commanded, and indeed cult activities are attested even after the removal of a cult.

Looting, on the other hand, was an essential and ubiquitous component of all warfare, and had been one since long before the conquest. The soldiers served primarily in hopes of acquiring booty, and commanders were always under considerable pressure to allow at least some looting after a victory. The historical narratives abound in accounts of seizure of vast amounts of portable wealth and of the attendant tense discussions on how to share it. Army camps, fortresses, subsidiary centers, villages, and even farms would be routinely sacked, while, as we have seen, this was much rarer for major cities. The priority target was private property, but public and religious ones were not always exempt. Loot included metal and precious objects but also livestock, food, furniture, and much else. There are often references to bulky

¹⁴ For example, over thirty Aequian fortified centers were destroyed in 304; Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 224 (=Liv. 9.45.17–18).

¹⁵ Such is the case of the burning of Satricum in 346, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 89 (=Liv. 7.27.8–9); or the fate of Capua at the end of Second Punic War (see pp. 130–33).

¹⁶ For Volsinii, Munzi 2001b; Steingraber and Della Fina 2010; for Falerii, Terrenato 2004a; Ambrosini 2017.

¹⁷ This is the context of the destruction of the walls of Priverno in 329; Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 137 (=Liv. 8.20.7).

spoils being sold by the general or army in the field.¹⁸ Obviously, the most valuable booty would be taken from elites, aside from the very rare cases of temple or treasury sacking. However, the long-lasting impact of such spoliation should not be exaggerated. The fraction of all the portable wealth that was taken away could not have been too high. In some cases, a time frame was given to soldiers for looting, and after a signal was sounded, it had to stop.¹⁹ Even in the worst instances of unchecked devastation, it would have been materially impossible for soldiers to get at all the stashed goods so quickly. Sacking could never be total, as is clearly indicated by the ability of the Romans to pay a rich ransom even after the terrible, prolonged Gallic occupation of their city.²⁰ In any case, for elite families relying on land as the source of their wealth, the rare occurrence of suffering from a sack of their homes could be nothing more than a temporary setback.

Once again, the continued deposition of rich grave goods after looting events makes it certain that far from all the aristocrats were reduced to penury. It is indeed possible, although only at times hinted at in the narratives, that those lineages that had connections with Roman generals or had offered help during the operations were likely to receive a more lenient treatment.²¹ In more general terms, it should be remembered that the circulation of mobile surplus – whether as a result of military action or in any of the traditional ways, such as gift or tribute – was largely circumscribed to elite interactions. Considerable volumes of portable wealth and prestige items had circulated between elites for many centuries, and, just like with gift-giving, the constant raiding back and forth would probably have balanced itself out to a certain extent over time. In this area, the conquest represented an intensification of a long-established practice, rather than a radical departure from it. While it has often been singled out as a crucial driving force behind Roman imperialism, looting was simply a long-term component of aristocratic behavior, instrumental to their self-representation as proud and wealthy. It can certainly help explain Italian elite militarism but not the emergence of a Roman territorial empire.

Research on Roman military leaders in the early phases of the conquest indicates that the way their writ was framed by the state government evolved

¹⁸ This sale could include prisoners and was defined as “under the crown” (*sub corona*); Welwei and Prachner 2000; Coudry 2009. One has to wonder who the loot would be sold to. Perhaps some of it back to those that had been looted? Or to their relatives in the case of prisoners? The boundaries between ransom and sale of loot were arguably very blurred.

¹⁹ Westington 1938: 97–107; Ziolkowski 1995.

²⁰ Briquel 2008; Poulle 2014.

²¹ A similar pattern to the one discernible in the case of enslavements and executions can be argued.

over time from the kind of free rein that raiding chiefs would have had.²² Once they left the legally regulated space of the city, they could move with great freedom, as long as they stayed in their general area of competence and did not attack allies. The main departure from what had happened beforehand was that, once a state began a course of permanent expansion, the looting would no longer be reciprocal – it could extend to subsidiary centers and even cities, and it could be more thorough. This would naturally have a significant centripetal effect on mobile wealth. Imperialists could be raided back (it happened to Rome), but overall, if successful, they would end up looting much more than they were looted. In the case of Rome, however, it should be kept in mind that the constant military involvement of its allies in growing numbers and the access to the army that Roman citizens living outside Rome had meant that the booty would not concentrate exclusively in the capital but would increasingly be distributed across the entire federation. In any case, the possibility of being raided must have been an acceptable risk, especially by those elites who did reside in major cities. On the other hand, it would also have been clear that, if Rome's imperialist bid prevailed on the others, the looting that took place at the time of the conquest would not happen again as long as the empire lasted. It would have been the raid that ended all raids.

The uncommon occurrence of the removal of public and religious hoards could have different repercussions from the looting of private homes. This slowly accumulated wealth did not really belong to the elites alone but to the entire community and had the specific function of buffering the local economy and funding exceptional infrastructural projects. The transfer of these resources to Rome, generally to public treasuries as a result of sacks (or of the move of the cult there), did make a significant difference in the economic landscape of central Italy. In this way, temple and state wealth in the capital, which was also massively fed by a share of the booty and by private contributions and votive offerings, grew very considerably, making Rome the center of gravity for the kind of exceptional initiatives that could be funded with it.²³ These projects, however, just like the wars, were conducted in collaboration with a broad base of aristocrats across the alliance. There can be no doubt that, in general terms of capital accumulation, Rome was obviously left much better off at the end of this period of redistribution associated with looting. But this was simply what could be expected in an

²² Brennan 2000; Drogula 2015: 58–59.

²³ Harris 1990; Orlin 1997; Becker 2009.

emerging imperial capital where elites, resources, and administrative reach were converging and increasing.

The communities of central and southern Italy were not enormously impoverished by the looting that came with the expansion. Many cities avoided it entirely, or almost so. While considerable wealth was drained toward Rome, the local elites were not excluded from its control. Indeed many of them moved to the expanding capital, following the loot and bringing their own resources. The inevitable waste associated with constant raiding could be avoided, compensating for some of the losses. More importantly, the looting did not affect the economic structure of the entire community too deeply, since in itself it could not really touch or alter profoundly the subsistence base or the land-based means of production of the entire community. Private and public displays of prosperity everywhere in unified Italy offer tangible proof that no radical depredation had taken place. It was certainly not the immediate transition that, even if violent, really disrupted the economic capabilities of the annexed peoples. The real challenge came a little further down the road, when the balances of power and the political interconnections would be defined anew. It is to that more extended aftermath of the conquest that close attention must be paid.

Diplomacy and Politics

It is arguable that what made the biggest difference to the outcome of the annexation for a local community was what happened to it in the few years after it entered the alliance. This was a crucial time in which the relationships between polities and the central power were comprehensively redefined and new balances were created. Renegotiation was possible and it did occasionally happen, but the relationships that came into existence in the aftermath of the conquest would often be relevant for many centuries later. Such relationships did not revolve exclusively around the terms of the peace treaty that was signed. It was a much broader setup that could also include patronage and other links between locals and Romans, constitutional reconfigurations in the annexed polity, possible rebalancing of power between its leading families, and much else. The political fortunes of local lineages were often significantly changed after the conquest, especially for those who had made the right move at the right time. The network of elite relationships and patronage could also easily be affected. Some old ones would be broken and new ones created, with important repercussions on how the game of political brokerage would be played. Finally, individual or

global citizenship grants, colonial foundations, and changes to local laws would all redesign the playing field for generations to come.

Studies often regard the status in which a community was left after its incorporation as overwhelmingly determined by unilateral decisions made by Rome, or at least by the Roman military leaders in charge. It is a defining point of the reconstruction presented in this book that such a view is a product of modern nationalist projections and is contradicted by a host of indicators. Roman agency was not without constraints, even in the cases of complete surrender, which were not uncommon. After a military clash, Italian communities often decided to “give” themselves to Rome. The community symbolically entrusted itself to the Romans, using a traditional terminology (*deditio*, *deditio in fidem*) that probably derived from older patronage relationships.²⁴ This, however, did not necessarily happen as a result of a crushing defeat, but could be prompted by the threat of an approaching enemy, or even simply by a desire to join in Rome’s expansionist bid. As we have seen in the case of Capua, such capitulations trumped conflicting peace treaties and placed a tangible moral obligation on their recipients.²⁵ Those who surrendered appeared to be putting themselves at the mercy of the Romans, but the latter, precisely because of the declaration of blind trust implicit in the act, were severely constrained in their actions. What was created in this way was not the abject subordination of one community to another but rather a paternalistic tie, regulated by traditional values (see [Figure 6.3](#)). Significantly, the abstract concept of Trust (with a capital “T”) was personified in Rome as the goddess Fides in the fourth century BCE, embodying a key element of the mentality of the time as well as of the expansion process.²⁶

More generally, it must be kept in mind that the kinds of relationships that were being developed and fostered at the time were embedded in the long-term evolution of a system of social dependencies that had been in place since the early first millennium BCE. As in many other areas, the new process can be seen as a scaled-up version of a traditional cultural element. The power of traditional kin group leaders had always been absolute only in theory, while in reality it was bounded by the expectations set by a shared paternalistic worldview.²⁷ In the same way, Rome was perceived by both parties to have incurred tangible moral obligations when they received anyone in their trust. Moreover, there were also practical political reasons

²⁴ Gruen 1982; Hölkeskamp 2000; Auliard 2006b; Groves 2013.

²⁵ See pp. 127–28.

²⁶ Ziolkowski 1992: 28–30; Clark 2007: 6–12; Davies 2017: 58–60.

²⁷ See p. 49.



Figure 6.3 Fresco from a tomb in the Esquiline cemetery of Rome. Dated to the fourth or third century BCE, it shows an encounter between a Roman general, Fabius, and a Samnite one, Fannius (La Rocca [1984](#)). While the precise historical context of this event is not known, it seems to reference an instance of negotiated agreement between Italian elites (photo by Sabrina Zottis).

for the Romans to appear to deal fairly with the Italians who surrendered to them. In such an interconnected system, each outcome of these relatively frequent events would be under everyone's eyes. For surrenders to be considered an option by other non-Romans, their results needed to be

predictable and acceptable. Had Rome been overly harsh too often, abusing the trust placed in her and violating the unwritten rules that everyone understood, it would have risked the possibility that polities considering surrender would instead have fought to the bitter end. Perhaps even those that had already capitulated would have revolted, especially those who had not experienced a crushing defeat. Such events were instead extremely infrequent and so were instances of allegiance switch. After all, there were for a long time competing expansionist projects in Italy that communities, faced with a choice, could have preferred to Rome's. Playing them one against the other gave Italian elites a precious bargaining chip to make sure they obtained a decent deal from the winning army. From this perspective, even after a shattering military victory, the Romans would still have had to tread very carefully if they did not want to render that victory politically empty and indecisive through the imposition of unacceptable conditions.

Surrenders only exemplify one of the many possible forms that the negotiation between elites in Rome and elsewhere could take. In many less extreme cases, a more balanced diplomatic solution was worked out, not necessarily as a result of military action. For a very substantial number of Italian polities there are no records of any war that immediately preceded their becoming allies of Rome. Treaties and truces were created after parleys that have at times left some historical trace.²⁸ The terms that were agreed upon defined the respective obligations and prerogatives of each party and could vary widely, reflecting the heterogeneity of the different contexts in which the conquest took place. The institutional terminology later used to describe these treaties is complex and at times contradictory.²⁹ One key concept appears to be that the balance between Rome and the other signatories could be perceived as less or more slanted in favor of the central power. Quite a few treaties were considered to be among equals, and the partners treated in this way ranged from mighty Carthage to puny Camerino. Others were unbalanced in Rome's favor and imposed special conditions on the other party. These most typically dictated some form of periodic tribute and/or war damages and the contribution of troops or other resources to the allied military effort. More rarely, land confiscations and other seizures of wealth could also be included as an additional punitive measure, which will be discussed later on.³⁰

²⁸ A full discussion in Auliard 2006a; see also the collection of texts in Canali De Rossi 2004.

²⁹ This field has attracted a vast amount of scholarship, hotly debating the precise nature of such treaties and constitutional forms; Hantos 1983; Rich 2008; Tarpin 2016.

³⁰ There apparently were "equal" and "less equal" treaties (*foedus aequum* or *iniquum*); Baronowski 1990; Sánchez and Sanz 2016.

Independent of the specifics of each treaty, there were also some fundamental principles that were common to the vast majority of them. Outside a few exceptions, the autonomy of the local community was not touched in any way. Whatever republican system was already in place (monarchies were at that point exceedingly rare), it was maintained and no centrally reporting administrators were deployed. Virtually everywhere, many of the lineages that had been in power before the conquest were still there afterwards. On the one hand, their ability to have a foreign policy in their state of origin would be severely curtailed (if not altogether removed), but on the other they would acquire a chance to participate in the federal decision-making process, if initially in a slightly subordinate role. In other words, the existing power networks and the basic fabric of society remained pretty much structurally unaltered, with landed elites controlling access to farming resources. As is clear from their actions, Romans not only did not want to perturb this basic fabric of Italian societies but indeed actively contributed to reinforce and shore it up whenever needed. Moreover, the generals in charge of each negotiation would typically want to advance and reinforce the position of their local friends and clients, as well as reinforce and create new local patronage links. In this as in many other things, they continued in a long tradition of Italian preexpansion politics. At times, the community in question might already have friendly lineages in power, and therefore there would be little need for violence. In others, there might have been a predominance of opponents. In the latter case, those elements that would have preferred another imperialist bandwagon, or were opposed to incorporation altogether, or simply belonged to a different factional network, like Vitruvius at Priverno, would be removed from the game more or less brutally and permanently. The demise of these aristocrats that happened to be on the wrong side, together with their many dependents, could account in part for the reports of killings, enslavements, and confiscations.³¹ They could have provided a significant amount of the loot that was the required fuel for the conquering process.

In conclusion, the political and diplomatic landscape that existed in the early days of the annexation of a community seems dominated by complex and wide-ranging negotiations that would take place between the leaders in charge of Roman operations, military or diplomatic, and the ones in power locally. In these dealings, the Romans had to play a delicate game of finding an acceptable compromise that would fuel and reward the mechanism of the conquest and at the same time not be seen as an outrage for those who were

³¹ See p. 199.

entering it. Far from being completely free to impose whatever conditions they wanted, Romans had to find just the right balance that would favorably impress other Italians, with the ultimate overall success of their bid at stake. Even if often altered and tilted in favor of the Romans, a balance of power still existed after the conquest. In terms of local autonomy, there must have been little alternative to that *laissez-faire* attitude that has been characterized for much of the early conquest, even outside Italy.³² Ethnic inclusiveness, social conservatism, global opportunities, and much else were also indispensable parts of the package that was being offered, rather than forced on local elites. The myth of Roman political omnipotence edified future generations of leaders, from Augustus to Napoleon, together with their historians, but it finds little basis in the realities of fourth- and third-century BCE Italy.

Local Elites after the Conquest

The active role that elites from all polities played during the expansion has been discussed in some detail in the [previous chapter](#). The trajectories of some, like the Plautii, that moved to Rome and joined the ranks of the aristocracy vying for central power there, have been examined, illustrating how they could seamlessly enter the political game in Rome at the highest levels and indeed bend it to their private purposes. Those same lineages engaged in complementary behaviors at the local level. They very frequently maintained a highly significant presence in their communities of origin, which is attested by acts of munificence and the maintenance of family tombs. They could also, as we have seen, move to a different polity or have branches in more than one, sometimes in very different geographic contexts. There was a clear positional advantage in their actions. On the one hand, they could spend in Rome the political influence that their patronage links across Italy produced as lobbyists, candidates, and senators. On the other hand, at the local level, they could offer help and representation to those who wanted to influence central policies, thus reinforcing their prestige and clout. Both these elements were essential parts of the expansion process that allowed the incorporated communities to have their voice heard in the capital. The elite families that were engaged in this complex but very rewarding activity would need to develop a Janus-like quality. They would be cosmopolitan capital-dwellers when interacting with their peers

³² E.g., Rosenstein [2012](#): 223–26; for the provinces, e.g., Millett [1990](#).

in Rome, but they would revert to their traditional roles and behaviors when they visited their constituencies.³³

It is also important, however, to take a look at what happened to the arguably more numerous elite groups that in the aftermath of the unification maintained their primary residence elsewhere than Rome, usually where they lived before the conquest. A combined picture is emerging from the epigraphic record, as well as from the funerary one, that suggests that elite continuity even through traumatic events was a fairly frequent occurrence. In terms of family names on inscriptions, it often happened that at least some of those known from earlier texts (typically not in Latin) were still attested after. Indeed where the epigraphic record is rich, as for instance at Chiusi, long family lines that span over the conquest can be reconstructed.³⁴ Names were often Latinized and sometimes even changed altogether, but the family descent can sometimes be reconstructed. Keeping in mind that the surviving texts must be a small sample of the total, any recurring names can be considered representative of a much larger phenomenon. Furthermore, in many communities the preconquest epigraphy is virtually nonexistent, making it impossible to see any permanence. Overall, the amount of survival visible to us from this dataset indicates that a very considerable proportion of Italian aristocracies managed to survive incorporation.³⁵

A conclusion of this kind finds very strong support in the evidence of elite burial practices. Here the preservation rate is generally better than with inscriptions, and the continuity is shown by the survival of very specific local traditions long after the unification. These tomb styles had usually developed over time since the seventh or sixth century BCE and their evolution was still ongoing at the time of the conquest, as well as after it. It was frequently the case, for instance in Etruria or in Campania, that each individual polity would have its own distinctive type of funerary architecture, and these peculiarities almost invariably survived at least into the second century BCE (see [Figure 6.4](#)). As a rule, elite burial in central and southern Italy became uniform only slowly and intermittently in the course of the following century, thus very long after the traumatic events had transpired, suggesting a change in elite fashions and self-representation rather than a replacement with lineages from other regions. In other areas, such as Latium or the lower Tiber valley, the burial practices were not significantly different from those of Rome, so it is impossible to obtain any

³³ Argument developed in full in Terrenato 1998b; see also Farney 2007: 1–38.

³⁴ Berrendonner and Munzi 1998; Huntsman 2015.

³⁵ General review in Cébeillac-Gervasoni 1983; Cébeillac-Gervasoni 1996.

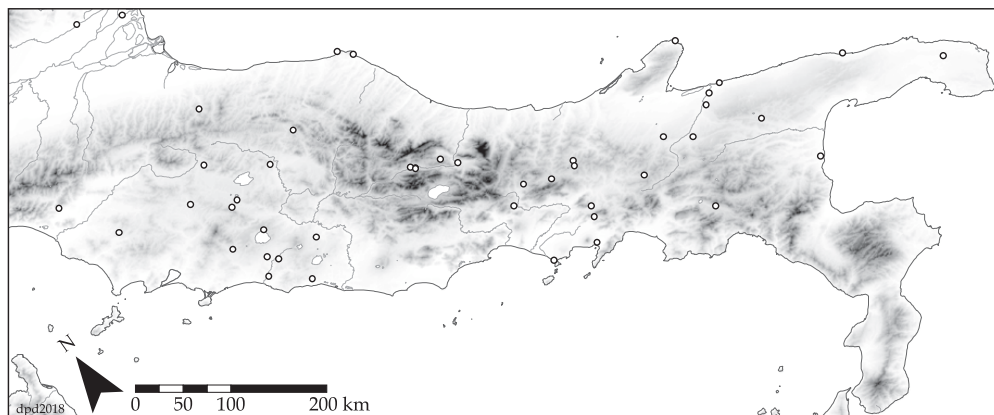


Figure 6.4 Map showing a partial distribution of central Italian graveyards in which continuity of local burial styles extends to the mid-second century BCE (based on Samuels and Terrenato forthcoming; illustration by D. Diffendale). See also [footnote 36](#).

diagnostic information in one sense or the other. On the whole, however, there is hardly a single instance in which the inclusion in the Roman state coincided with a radical shift in elite funerary traditions.³⁶

The importance of finding Italian elites in good health after the unification, at home, in Rome, and in other cities should not be underestimated. In significant numbers, they emerged from the great political transformation without apparent significant loss of wealth or status. In fact, some of them saw their fortunes soar beyond their rosiest expectations, at times even rising to the leadership of the new empire, while others were hurt and eliminated in the associated violence and upheaval. Whatever later narratives reconstructed long after the fact,³⁷ the expansion did not lead to the subjugation and demotion of existing power structures. This is a fundamental reality of early Roman expansion and it cannot be easily squared with theories centered on Roman one-sided dominance and even oppression of other Italians. It is hard not to conclude that Italian elites benefited from expansion at least as much as the Old Roman ones did, and in far greater numbers. Adopting a basic *cui bono* approach, it would be

³⁶ In the absence of a much-needed general study of funerary continuity, it is impossible to cite here all the individual site studies that support this assertion. Samuels and Terrenato, forthcoming, will present a synthesis on elite survival, with contributions, among others, by Leah Bernardo-Ciddio, Sheira Cohen, Alexandra Creola, Amelia Eichengreen, James Faulkner, Emily Lime, Parrish Wright, Arianna Zapelloni Pavia.

³⁷ These narratives were incidentally mostly written by Italian elites that had successfully come to Rome; Bloomer 1997.

surprising if they offered a desperate resistance to something that would be advantageous for a large proportion of them.

Enslavement and Social Dependency

The reconstruction of incorporation politics put forth so far may seem to be radically contradicted by the sanctions, which had deep socio-economic implications, that were imposed by the Romans on the polities that became part of their empire. Beginning with those that affected the people, enslavements, hostage taking, imprisonments, and forced resettling are often highlighted in modern accounts in support of aggressive interpretations of the expansion process. The full complexity and range of the phenomenon, however, is rarely taken into consideration, and a few supposedly paradigmatic examples are instead emphasized. The point of departure must again be that there is a vast majority of communities in Italy (especially urban) for whom no violent or traumatic event is recorded at the time of their incorporation, suggesting that the bulk of them did not suffer unbearable losses to their means of subsistence and production.³⁸ For those cases in which sanctions are attested, a variety of contextualizations and qualifications are necessary, making their significance and impact different from what they are frequently assumed to be.

Forms of war-related enslavement of various types had existed in Italian societies long before the conquest. A spectrum of different situations blurring into each other can be intuited through the fragmentary accounts and references. Prisoners taken in the course of raids could be held for ransom or as hostages, exchanged for other prisoners, forced into marriage, or kept as house slaves or social dependents of other kinds. The size of this phenomenon, however, appears to have been relatively small and its overall impact limited.³⁹ Most importantly, in a premonetary society, there is little indication that the people in these conditions would be seen as commodities, in the way it would happen at the end of the first millennium BCE. Even debt bondage was simply a means of extracting repayment.⁴⁰ The individuals who found themselves with these ties were not anonymously bought and sold but rather immersed in complex social transactions with people they knew well, and who were sometimes their former peers.

³⁸ See p. 153.

³⁹ This happened in the context of other forms of ties, like debt bondage, serfdom, and so on, Bradley 2011; Benelli 2013.

⁴⁰ Bernard 2016.

House slaves and serfs, just like clients, were often considered classificatory members of the lineage they belonged to, although of the lowest possible rank. But if they were not redeemed and stayed, they could even improve their status, with greater ease apparently if their social condition of origin had been high. Promotion and intermarriage were not impossible, if we are to believe the sociocultural context within which some narratives are set.⁴¹

As in many other areas, the time of the expansion marked a significant change and a refunctionalization of old practices. First, the size of enslavements associated with the conquest grew much larger and the nature of their condition seems to have changed. It was still the case that there were many different forms that the phenomenon could take, but on the whole the range seems to have shifted considerably toward chattel slavery. Some of the old traits were maintained, such as the possibility for special slaves, whether freed or not, to hold important functions within the family. Unlike modern slavery, in this context the rank and skills that the slave had as a free person were important to determine his or her role in the new condition. Thus we see urban slaves often having highly specialized functions, such as teachers, accountants, secretaries, or even poets. The latter play a central role in the beginnings of a written literature in Latin. For slaves of this kind, emancipation was not an unrealistic goal and indeed it became a reality for many of them. Their freedom could be bought by relatives and friends, or with the wealth they were allowed to accumulate themselves. They were also frequently freed simply for services rendered, especially during the execution of the will of the owner. The redeemed slaves would take the family name of the owner (another indication of the nature of the bond) and, together with their successors, would become clients of their former masters. They also acquired full Roman citizenship, a highly desirable status at the time that many nonenslaved Italians coveted.⁴²

At the other end of the spectrum was the fate of slaves who were used for menial work, especially as farm hands. These subordinates were much less connected with the family they served and their fate was undoubtedly much harsher. Without any special skills or individual distinction, they could be bought and sold as merchandise, rather than be seen as bonded family members. Opportunities for emancipation and wealth accumulation were of course much scarcer, and a contemporary writer explicitly advised that owners should sell old and useless farming slaves.⁴³ All this probably

⁴¹ Mouritsen 2010.

⁴² Synthesis in Bradley 1994; Edmondson 2011.

⁴³ The Elder Cato; Reay 2005. For questions about his representativeness, see Terrenato 2012.

introduced an entirely new social and cultural element, causing uprooting and loss of identity to a much larger extent than ever before. The experience of enslavement in these new terms must have been much less bearable and disruptive than anything that happened before, contributing to the slow erosion of traditional communities.

The most delicate question in dealing with slavery in the fourth and third centuries BCE is estimating its relative size, to determine the actual demographic impact it would have had. It is also essential to keep it separate from the situation in later periods, when it certainly had a much larger scope and a different nature. Mass auctions, slave-run plantations, and servile revolts all belong to the first century BCE or later and their dark shadow (and even less that of the African slave trade) should not be projected back on this period. Given the uncertainties about the overall population and the number of enslavements, widely different positions are held, with estimates as low as two hundred thousand for the second century BCE. The figures given in historical accounts suffer from the same issues as those for war casualties. It should also be observed that, not surprisingly, the largest numbers of war-related enslavements were recorded for highlanders like the Samnites, rather than for urban states.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is impossible to determine how many of the prisoners sold into slavery would be ransomed immediately or within a short time, which is tantamount to another form of looting and would have had little long-term social effect. Finally, the frequency of later emancipations is also uncertain, although there was a tax collected on them (based on the value of the slave) that produced very considerable revenues. One useful element definitely comes from rural archeology, which shows clearly that no agricultural establishments large or sophisticated enough to be slave-run have been found, strongly indicating that farming chattel slaves were very rare in this period.

In conclusion, slavery at the time of the conquest of Italy should not be considered a very significant factor, whose proportions we cannot determine for sure but which is unlikely to have revolutionized the majority of the local communities of the peninsula. It may have been used particularly against those few groups that were least amenable to incorporation, against which the really violent wars were fought and harsh sanctions imposed. The forced move to the urban, coastal areas would have helped drain manpower to the core of the alliance. It also enabled elites to expand their patronage, giving them yet another avenue to add handpicked, loyal citizens to the electorate easily. It should be kept in mind that, more generally, resettlement

⁴⁴ List of enslavements in Harris 1979: 59–60. Critique in Welwei and Prachner 2000.

was a known tool, and mostly used in the second and first centuries, to deal with unruly highlanders, as the case of the Ligurians exemplifies very well. Once again, rather than a global social reorganization, which would have been in any case beyond their reach, against their mentality, and detrimental to further expansion, the Romans radically uprooted people only in extreme cases, typically where the behaviors of the vanquished were incompatible with the alliance that they were putting together.⁴⁵

Keeping the role and impact of slavery within reasonable proportions leaves space to consider other long-established forms of social dependency that also contributed to keeping Italian societies together and to shaping the unification process. There was a whole range of roles in different communities that were far from that of chattel slaves and yet not free either. Especially in rural contexts and away from the metropolitan areas and their immediate hinterlands, there were still farmers who were tied to local aristocrats by links of serfdom, share-cropping, chronic debt, and even extreme forms of permanent clientship.⁴⁶ The presence of these traditional forms of dependency, despite their limited visibility, provided a strong counterbalance to the innovations introduced by enslavements, confiscations, and redistributions. A new wave of excavations of peasant sites is uncovering this aspect of Italian rural life, characterized by long-term continuity in settlement patterns, vernacular architecture, and productive and subsistence behaviors, and is discussed in greater detail below. The rare survival of nonelite burials in this context further supports this reconstruction.

While especially in cities the old social order was being challenged by complex changes, Roman actions were often explicitly aimed at shoring it up, so it should not be surprising that the expansion they also promoted did not otherwise disrupt it. The overall effect of the conquest on vertical social links across Italy in the time of the conquest appears to have expanded and given new scope to existing structures, rather than revolutionizing them. This made it possible to use forms of interaction that were familiar to everybody for different purposes and with unprecedented results. Aside from certain limited areas and contexts, enslavements were embedded in the existing social fabric and did not tear it apart. The real growth in size and importance is visible in the patronage networks that tied all the forms of dependency together. Much larger agglomerations were created by the

⁴⁵ Boatwright 2015.

⁴⁶ The ongoing role of such social structures is well attested and discussed in many specialist studies, but has struggled to be appreciated in most general syntheses; Torelli 1987; Terrenato 2007a; de Ligt 2012.

inclusion of freed slaves, debtors, and prisoners, but also of entire lineages, communities, and even regions as a result of the expansion process. The sheer increase in their range and the number of people involved in them probably increased their significance and their variability, but also made them into even more crucial political tools in the new games that were being played across the entire peninsula. Such huge constellations of social groups became the contenders that struggled for power in the emergent allied society for much higher stakes than ever before.⁴⁷

Confiscations

Together with slavery, the material implication of the conquest that has been universally considered to have had a major effect on Italian communities is land confiscations. Mentioned far more often in historical accounts than destructions, mass executions, or enslavement, the seizure of a portion of a polity's entire land, like a quarter or a third (or an unspecified amount), was not an uncommon sanction applied to a defeated enemy, especially to punish a perceived betrayal or rebellion.⁴⁸ Taken at face value, the loss of means of production on such a large scale would result in a terrible shock to the entire society. The vast majority of Italians derived their subsistence from resources based on land, and its control had a significant role in shaping social and economic relationships between peoples and social classes. Traditional structures would collapse, real estate prices would fluctuate wildly, and vast numbers of dispossessed farmers would have to move elsewhere. In some established reconstructions, this disruption would open the door to the emergence of larger estates, of specialized agriculture, and to the construction of villas. Roman investors would be able to rent or purchase such land in auctions conducted by government officials.⁴⁹ Alternatively, the confiscated land could be used to establish colonies. The situation with colonies will be discussed in the following section, but in the meantime it is essential to take a look at the mechanism of confiscation, as far as it can be reconstructed.

The loss of land is frequently mentioned rather cursorily in the immediate aftermath of a defeat, as a sanction that was presumably included in the peace treaty or in the terms of surrender. There is never any data on

⁴⁷ Wallace-Hadrill 1989; Deniaux 2006.

⁴⁸ E.g., the confiscation of one third of the land of Frusino in 303, Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 227 (=Liv. 10.1.2).

⁴⁹ Such is the stark picture painted by many economic imperialists, e.g., Carandini 1988.

how and by whom the selection of properties to be confiscated was made or of how the fraction was actually calculated. It is possible that the decision was made by Roman commanders in coordination with the local leaders in power after the war was over. This may have resulted in the particular penalization of those families that had offered the most resistance, similarly to what was argued for killings, enslavements, and looting.⁵⁰ It is even conceivable that in some cases friendly local people may have been the recipient of a part of the confiscated land.⁵¹ In most cases, we also lack specific information concerning the future allocations of the confiscated property, but sometimes it is mentioned afterwards as a part of the public land or of distributions made to Roman citizens or colonists. While in later times the handling of such public land seems to have been more strictly regulated, for the period in question there could have been a variety of possible scenarios. In some cases, it was probably auctioned off immediately by the general as part of the overall looting. In others, it was clearly added to the public land that the Roman state controlled, so its control would have been in the hands of the senate. By default, the latter would rent it out, unless it decreed at some point to distribute it, auction it off, or install a colony on it.

In most cases, one should not assume that the farmers who were installed on confiscated land would automatically and immediately be evicted. It is clear that a lot of public land stayed unassigned for long periods of time, during which it would be rented out in auctions or even left to be temporarily and informally occupied. It is attested that the original farmers were often able to remain, albeit precariously, on their land.⁵² In immediate sales or in later auctions, they or, more likely, some local elites they depended on may have been able to purchase it. They may or may not have been the original owners, but in any case they represented an element of continuity in the local society. Such elites would typically be able to offer higher bids because their costs would be much lower and their local knowledge much greater than an outside investor. It should also be remembered that this was an area where bribery and false compliance were very attractive options, since the central government in Rome necessarily struggled to keep under control regions that were at increasing distances as the expansion proceeded.⁵³

⁵⁰ This clearly was the case in the rebellion of Vitruvius Vaccus discussed at pp. 178–88; Martin 1990; Terrenato 2014. More generally, Salerno 1990. Better attested cases of confiscations specifically targeting certain factions to the benefit of others happened in the aftermath of the Second Punic War, Fronda 2010: 313–16.

⁵¹ This had happened at Veii, see p. 115.

⁵² Roselaar 2010: 69–71.

⁵³ See for instance the later case of confiscations at Volterra; Terrenato 1998b.

When a totally new lessee, assignee, or owner actually showed up, he would face considerable difficulties in taking material possession of the land. Since this generally happened long after the Roman army had left the area, there was no local authority that would be particularly motivated to support his claim. Roman authority might have been more likely enforced in cases of group assignments of large portions of land, but it often would have been much more expedient to sublet or resell the land altogether to the locals and walk away with a profit. Behaviors of this kind certainly took place even in colonial assignments, since later on norms curbing them were introduced. Thus confiscation could easily have been reduced to the imposition of a tribute or a ransom price on land that mostly remained in the hands of those traditionally cultivating it, analogous to what has been hypothesized in the case of enslavements.⁵⁴ It is true that the measures sanctioned by Rome could introduce a stronger monetary element, forcing the primary producers to have some cash to pay to stay on their land.

Recent archeological work, especially field surveys and rural excavations in various parts of central and southern Italy, has provided crucial support for a reconstruction of this kind. It overwhelmingly shows that the existing farming landscape was mostly unaffected by the political transformation. The small farming sites that became ubiquitous throughout the central Mediterranean well before the unification started continued their occupation for centuries.⁵⁵ When first identified, for instance in the surveys near Veii, they were interpreted as the settlements of Roman colonists; but it is now clear that they are instead part of a global phenomenon that predates the conquest almost everywhere. Excavations at some of these sites show the continuity of building styles and traditional small-scale production and self-consumption.⁵⁶ Thus not only the location and size of these sites remained the same for centuries but even their building techniques and productive behaviors, making it extremely hard to imagine massive resettlements of people of a different culture and background into these areas. This reconstruction is further corroborated by the virtual absence of villas or other elite agricultural establishments in this period that would have replaced the small farms.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ It is in light of considerations of this kind that historians like Mouritsen (1998: 39–58) have provocatively argued that the amount of actual resettlement that went on in confiscated areas before the Gracchi was relatively small.

⁵⁵ See pp. 89–100.

⁵⁶ Terrenato 2007b; Attema, Burgers and van Leusen 2010: 147–50; Pulcinelli 2016: 385–92.

⁵⁷ Terrenato 2001b; Marzano 2007.

Such a stable picture goes well with a consideration of the limited number of attested confiscations in the fourth and third centuries BCE and with a more nuanced understanding of their real significance. Greater disruption arguably took place in the late second and first centuries BCE, but those events, with little connection to the unification, should not be projected back on the time of the conquest. In these conservative rural contexts, it is hard to imagine commoner families moving in from far away in large numbers without some kind of patronage link to local elites. Limited movement had of course always happened, but it never reached a scale that could seriously change the traditional rural order.⁵⁸ In different ways, the same basic outcome can be argued for aristocratic involvement in the countryside. Some local elites, especially if they had sided against the winning faction, were more at risk of losing their land than the commoners. They could well be replaced by local peers who had made better political decisions and who were using the Roman system to accomplish their goals. It is also entirely possible that aristocrats from outside entered into the scene as renters or purchasers of the expropriated estates.⁵⁹ Given the survival of the farms, it must however be concluded that they simply maintained the existing arrangements, extracting surplus from small-scale agriculturalists in the customary way regulated by patronage and other forms of social dependence. The loyalty of the latter was attached more to the social structure in itself than to specific elites. It is possible that these new lords may have been greedier in their exactions than the old ones, but they had an economic as well as a political interest in leaving and keeping the subordinate class in place. In a perspective of this kind, purchasing or renting public land would not have been different from acquiring the temporary or permanent rights to exert social control over an area, replacing the existing lords. If we remember that a certain amount of mobility of landed elites had existed for centuries, it is tempting to conclude that the same process continued with other means. The main innovation would have resided in the fact that the new elites acceding to power were for the vast majority linked in one way or another to the expansion project.

In conclusion, the war-related confiscations and the consequent creation of significant quantities of public land owned by the Roman state had a tangible impact on Italian landscapes, but not in the ways that have been generally envisaged. The system was flexible and served different purposes at once. It allowed imposing war damages and tribute on an incorporated

⁵⁸ Overview in Isayev 2017.

⁵⁹ Zancan 1935; Roselaar 2010: 200–09.

community that had chosen the wrong side. It was a way of extracting surplus from local farmers without revolutionizing their lifestyle, while at the same time ensuring their loyalty by making their ownership right precarious. It was also an efficient tool to produce the political rearrangements that were necessary for the stability of the new entity, by reinforcing the traditional social order at a time of increased instability. When necessary, the system facilitated the replacement of old ruling elites with new ones that had the right connections with the groups promoting and supporting the expansion process. This complex transition left land tenure patterns essentially the same in a vast majority of cases, while at the same time reshuffling some elite networks and somehow shoring up the old social order and the new political formation at the same time.

Colonies

Roman colonial foundations are frequently given pride of place in the mainstream treatments of the unification of Italy that argue for a complete reorganization in the aftermath of the expansion. Having given the very name (and at times legitimacy too) to the Western European concept of colonialism, it is not surprising that they appear as material testimonies to the power and control that Rome had imposed. Once again, however, the implicit analogy with modern processes is very misleading, and new, more detailed work is showing a very different picture.⁶⁰ Colonies were not a standard tool used to administer a territorial empire or to populate it. They were legally independent polities that were automatically part of the alliance with Rome and could not leave it without consequences. The Roman state took action to create colonies in Italy mostly in an intense but relatively brief wave from the late fourth to the early second century BCE. About fifty of them were founded in this period, with a main cluster in Latium, Campania, and South Etruria. The rest were scattered on the eastern and southern coasts and in the Po Plain. Their distribution is therefore far from uniform and primarily has the effect of enriching an already thriving urban network, and only secondarily to establish cities in previously nonurbanized areas. The main concentration coincides with those contexts closer to Rome that put up the least resistance against the expansion, while the farther, really problematic areas of the central highlands or of Liguria were largely avoided (see [Figure 6.5](#)). Most colonies brought

⁶⁰ Full argument in Terrenato 2005; a powerful deconstruction in Pelgrom 2018.

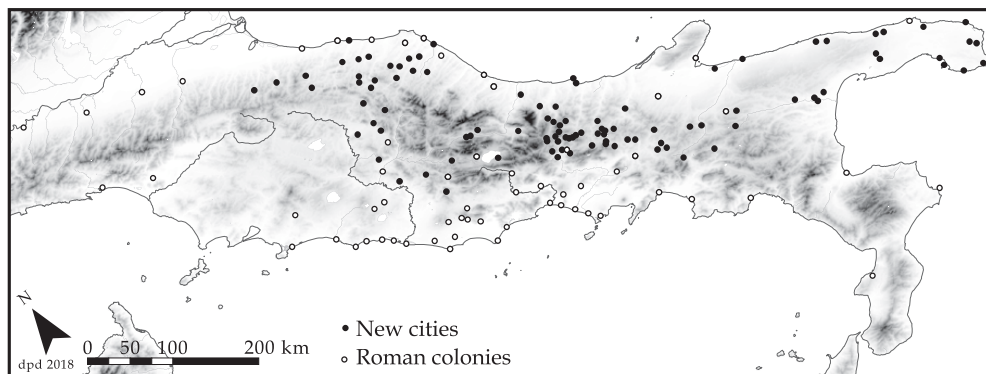


Figure 6.5 Map showing the distribution of colonies founded by Rome in the fourth and third centuries, combined with the distribution of new “higher order centers” that emerged in the same period in eastern Italy (Sewell 2016). It illustrates how Roman colonialism was only one aspect of a much broader wave of urbanization in the peninsula (illustration by D. Diffendale).

brand new cities into existence, sometimes on the site of an existing smaller settlement, but occasionally they were created on urbanized sites that were already there, reusing most of the architectural infrastructure.⁶¹

The decision to found a colony was formally taken by the senate, with a significant role being played by the general who had recently conquered the area where the colony was to be created. Officials, typically including the relevant general, were put in charge of selecting the precise location and organizing the new city, carrying out the foundation rituals, delineating the walls, selecting colonists, and allotting them farmland. The colonists received full or partial Roman citizenship (with effects that will be discussed in the next section), elected their own city leaders, and passed their own laws.⁶² Much of the functional interpretation of these colonies obviously depends on the composition of the colonists who were selected to form the new polity. The long-held assumption has been that the bulk of them would be poor Roman citizens who would be lured away from the capital (as well as from full citizenship in most cases) by the prospect of receiving a tract of seized land. This view of colonization would of course be in line with the idea that confiscations had a high impact. Together, these two processes would result in a radical social and economic reorganization of Italy.⁶³

⁶¹ *Colonizzazione* 1988; Laffi 2007; Bradley 2014.

⁶² Salmon 1969; Gargola 1995.

⁶³ This is the standard explanation for aggressive imperialists, e.g., Crawford 1978; critique in Pelgrom and Stek 2014; much more balanced picture, with important review of the evidence in Gagliardi 2015.

A closer scrutiny of colonial makeups has revealed a much more nuanced picture of Roman colonial development. Looking at the epigraphic record of the new cities, it is clear that the citizens were not exclusively of Roman or Latin origin. Many of their family names reveal that they were of local extraction or came from other allied communities. Even those that had Latin-sounding names could well have different provenance, considering the frequent movements across linguistic groups that had been taking place for centuries.⁶⁴ Consideration of burial customs in the colonies strongly supports the conclusion that many of the wealthier inhabitants of colonies belonged to the local culture or had adopted it. Etruscan-style tombs prevail in colonies located in southern Etruria, and Campanian ones in Campania, while those in Latium are obviously not diagnostic.⁶⁵ Only occasionally, and typically in the course of the second century BCE, did tombs in the Roman tradition become predominant. Even in those cases, however, it should be remembered that they could belong to non-Roman groups that had changed their burial practices.⁶⁶ The presence of elite tombs in colonies also indicates that, contrary to a generally held view, there was deep social stratification among the colonists.⁶⁷

The evidence from rural surveys conducted around Roman colonies does not typically show global reorganizations of the human landscapes clearly connected with the new urban foundation. As was argued in reference to confiscations, the observed settlement patterns are very much in line with the diffusion of local small-scale farming that took place everywhere and cannot necessarily be associated with land distributions. An important element in this sense is offered by late third- and early second-century BCE colonies, where the creation of the farms can be dated to before the time of the foundation and no later disruption is visible.⁶⁸ Centuriation has of course long been highlighted as a material correlate of the reshuffling of land tenure patterns, but, as will be discussed in the next section, its real value

⁶⁴ Bispham 2006a; Bradley 2006. Bradley's conclusions can only be conservative estimates, considering that he is mostly looking at the linguistic provenance of attested family names.

⁶⁵ Nepi and Sutri are cases in point, showing great quantities of Etruscan burials after the colonial foundation in 382 BCE, and the same happens in Campania at Paestum, colonized in 273 BCE; Morselli 1991; Torelli 1999a.

⁶⁶ This is the case of Luni, for instance; Frova 1997. These however tend to be the exception rather than the rule, and to be located in hard-to-assimilate regions such as Liguria.

⁶⁷ The assumption of equality among colonists is based on their receiving lots of land of equal size. Sometimes, however, it is attested that some elite colonists received much more land; Gargola 1995: 89–92.

⁶⁸ For instance at Brindisi, Dutch surveys have shown that the network of small sites predates the foundation of 244 BCE and it is largely unaffected by it; Attema, Burgers, and van Leusen 2010: 59–81; other examples in Casarotto, Pelgrom, and Stek 2016.

has been seriously called into question. In short, it is presently very difficult to point to any tangible effect that the creation of a colony would have had on its landscape, and often also on its graveyards. This apparent paradox can be explained with the help of the evidence mentioned above. The locals who were allowed to enroll in the colony would of course continue their existing farming and burial practices. Those who were not may have been able to rent or buy back the land they had before from the alien assignees. Many of the newcomers that effectively became members of the new polity evidently were inclined to blend in within the existing human landscape and culture. This is a common response when the outsiders coming in are heterogeneous and a minority. The overall result is a farming community that is virtually indistinguishable from the one that existed before and is in line with those of other areas where no colonies were founded. Even if some land changed hands, the effect was not very different from the physiological turnover that had been happening for centuries.

The main material difference resulting from the creation of a colony was the new city itself that came into existence. Aside from the few cases when an existing urban site was used, new walls and buildings would appear, indicating the presence of a city where there was none before. All colonies had, from the time of the foundation, imposing fortifications and ornate temples, but not much else in terms of public buildings (see [Figure 6.6](#)). In this, as in most other respects, they were very similar to other noncolonial cities of the period. Far from being scaled-down replicas of Rome, they simply adhered to the prevailing standards for urbanism. Their frequent gridded layout is a trait that was shared with most other founded cities of the period, and not only in Italy, and certainly would not have been perceived as distinctly Roman at that time.⁶⁹ More generally, the popular view of the Romans having introduced rational urbanism in relatively savage lands is certainly not widely applicable for this period of the expansion. Most colonies were founded in areas that were already thickly urbanized, and other coastal areas were trending toward the creation of cities on their own. Indeed Roman colonies in Italy have to be seen as an integral part of the second great wave of urbanism in the central Mediterranean, which filled in many of the gaps left by the first, rather than as a radical new development driven by unique policies. They instead created or reorganized urban environments in ways that were familiar to most of the people involved, without revolutionizing the surrounding countryside. It was a process that, like many others at this time,

⁶⁹ Orthogonal layouts are attested in noncolonial contexts; Keay, et al. 2000; Becker, Mogetta, and Terrenato 2009.



Figure 6.6 View of the bath building at the colony of Fregellae. A rare example of a non-religious public building from the third century BCE, it exemplifies the kinds of projects that were created in central Italian cities in the time of the conquest (Tsiolis 2013; photo by D. Diffendale).

was moderated by negotiation and by an aversion for radical social change. The Roman magistrates in charge of founding a colony could not do just as they pleased, even less so than victorious generals. In this, as in other things, they had to find a balance between the needs of the power structures existing in the area and the pressures from the rest of the alliance, if they wanted to succeed locally and keep their expansionist bid globally palatable.

The role of non-Roman elites in the creation of colonies is not well understood, but it cannot have been minimal. The traditional rich burials offer evidence that at least some lineages continued to be present in the area, while others may have moved in from surrounding contexts, perhaps to replace those that had fallen victim to the expansion-related factional violence. It is hard to determine how this would affect the social structure of the new polity in its early days, but it would be surprising if the Romans, elsewhere such careful preservers of established hierarchies, had been promoting egalitarian communities, whose social structure differed significantly from that of other cities in the alliance. Certainly, in their later life, for which we are better informed, colonies displayed the same kind of stratification that was found everywhere else in the empire. This reconstruction would involve the perpetuation, in colonial contexts, of those links of social interdependence that were ubiquitous elsewhere. It would have been

natural for newcomers and locals to come together in a community that replicated the one they were familiar with. And indeed there is some later evidence of colonial aristocrats playing the same role of political brokers that their peers had in other kinds of polities.⁷⁰ Another important area of negotiation was the establishment of public cults in the new cities. Far from adopting Roman state religion everywhere, the colonies show a wide variety of deities, with the main contribution made by those who were already present in the area and those that were particularly dear to the magistrates in charge of the foundation.⁷¹ The obvious reason for this pattern is to build on existing religious behaviors and to strengthen the patronage links with the founders. Priestly appointments would of course have a very significant role in defining the ranks of aristocrats in the new polity.

In this comprehensive view, the creation of colonies made an important contribution to the overall transformation and realignment of patronage networks that the conquest had prompted. Old and new elites, victorious generals, magistrates in charge of the deduction (with their respective entourages), local commoners and recently arrived ones, and soldiers all participated in creating a different power structure, one that favored the groups that had maneuvered successfully, that had effectively negotiated the complex transition, and that were firmly committed to being part of the Roman expansionist bid. Herein must have resided the primary function of Roman colonization, rather than settling landless poor Romans. It created client communities that were tightly linked to a specific factional network and defined ways for local elites to interact with the central power. Citizenship grants, assignation to voting districts, patronage links, and cultic choices all repositioned the new polity in the changed political landscape of central and southern Italy. Another goal was clearly to expand the urban system of the region at a time of global expansion of this basic administrative unit of territorial empires. Pushing the boundaries of the urbanized world brought a much larger part of the central Mediterranean into the political interactions that western coastal cities had been involved in for centuries before the unification.

The colonial foundations were also of course staunch supporters of the Roman Empire as a whole. Only in very exceptional cases did colonies refuse the material help they contractually owed to the alliance. The same

⁷⁰ At Volterra, there is evidence that the local aristocrats busily pulled strings in Rome to preempt and soften the blow to the existing farmers. They bargained with the central power, using connections, influence, and even bribes, so that the commoners whose loyalty represented their main resource would be, at least in part, safeguarded; Terrenato 1998b.

⁷¹ Coles 2009; Bolder-Boos 2011.

was true, incidentally, for most other Italian polities, so colonial loyalty should not be singled out above all others. That loyalty was not rooted in the participation of ethnic Latins and Romans but rather in the patronage links and the disproportionate stake that these communities had in the expansion process. Regardless of their background, the colonists had citizenship rights that gave them important priorities and rights in the alliance. Handpicked by the magistrate, they were artificially engineered, so to speak, to have exactly the leanings that their founders wanted and to add to their patronage networks. The political access and the elite connections meant that colonies enjoyed a privileged status vis-à-vis the other allies. Thus they had a lot to lose from a collapse of the empire and this, much more than any ethnic or cultural allegiance, was what tied them tightly to the prevailing order.

Since a colony involved such a considerable reshuffling of power networks, it is important also to consider what prompted the deployment of this special administrative tool. While again no uniform pattern is discernible, some elements seem to recur among the many individual instances. In areas such as Latium or south Etruria, colonies were used in the complex interactions with local elites when the creation of a new, loyal center of power could solve a fractured or hostile situation. Working with their local friends, and against their local enemies, Roman magistrates could create an additional administrative unit that would have the right political alignment. In more peripheral areas, such as the eastern coast, Liguria, the central highlands, or the Po Plain, colonies could instead serve the function of creating a suitable partner for the alliance among people whose nature fit in poorly with the urbanized rest of the territorial empire. Here existing political structures were reformatted into cities ruled by landed elites and bound by patronage links, bringing them in line with the conditions in western central Italy.

Very unevenly distributed across unified Italy, the colonies founded by Rome were a far cry from a standardized imperial administrative tool. Rather they addressed local problems with ad hoc solutions, which operated within a much broader spectrum of interactions and transformations. Even in the minority of cases in which they introduced urbanism, they did not lead to a revolution in land tenure patterns and social structures. Most of them made the urban and political system richer and more complex, but they did not change its essential nature. Observed at the scale of individual families, the creation of a colony could easily make or break fortunes and prestige systems. However, at a more macroscopic level, even an epoch-making transformation such as this produced a new community of a kind similar to the ones that existed already. No new social or economic systems

were introduced, and this allowed everyone to continue to make sense of the new reality.

Centuriation

Few empires have been as strongly associated with a specific kind of landscape modification as the Roman one. Central to many current perceptions of the consequences of the conquest of central and southern Italy is the notion that land was not only confiscated but also widely resubdivided along radically new and highly geometric lines. Orthogonal gridding, referred to as centuriation, created standardized parcels that could be allotted to colonists, settlers, and, later, veterans. In modern Roman historiography, a considerable effort has gone into discovering and documenting these alignments, often taking them as crucial evidence of the impact of conquest and colonization. Indeed the study of these traces has developed into a sub-discipline of its own, with some scholars devoting much of their careers to it.⁷² Even more remarkable for a discipline that traditionally privileged textual material, material evidence was collected and extensively used for broad historical inferences. When it comes to centuriation, however, texts are very scarce, rather contradictory, and dating to many centuries after the conquest. Historical narratives for the fourth and third centuries contain of course references to confiscated land being divided and assigned, but they do not say anything about the geometric nature of the subdivisions.⁷³ On the other hand, more specific information is contained in a very late compilation of technical texts for the use of Roman land surveyors, where the connection with specific instances and territories, however, is rather tenuous, especially for the period here in question.⁷⁴ Combining the information provided by these material traces and by the textual references in fact produces results that are far less clear and uncontroversial than is sometimes believed.⁷⁵

A fundamental problem is connected with the nature of the archaeological remains in question. The vast majority of them are represented by rectilinear alignments that have been detected in present-day roads, field boundaries, and drainage lines, or in maps produced in the last few hundred

⁷² E.g., Gerard Chouquer or François Favory.

⁷³ A review of the evidence in Roselaar 2010: 1–17.

⁷⁴ Campbell 2000.

⁷⁵ An early date for centuriation in Italy is maintained mostly by Italian scholars, Castagnoli 1984; Quilici 1994.

years. When alignments of this kind are deemed to be parallel or orthogonal to each other, they are interpreted as vestiges of an ancient centuriation, even when their state of preservation is fragmentary. The case is reinforced with observations of regularities in the intervals between lines, especially if they match known Roman metrological standards.⁷⁶ These inferences rest on an assumption that remnants of Roman alignments would somehow have become embedded into modern landscape lines, often with little or no discussion of the intermediate steps that would have assured their survival through the intervening periods. In the few cases in which these traces have been excavated, they have produced virtually no material remains or reliable dating elements.⁷⁷ A certain number of inscribed centuriation marker stones are known from various locations in central and southern Italy, but they are all pertinent to late second-century BCE or later subdivisions.⁷⁸ Despite the intrinsic limitations of the available evidence, the presence of conquest-era centuriation has been asserted confidently a number of times. The argument usually takes the form of combining the historical narrative about a confiscation or a colonial foundation with linear traces located in the relevant territory.⁷⁹ In some cases, for instance in the Po Plain, the conclusion appears more credible, given the extensive preservation of these alignments in the flat alluvial environment, which is particularly suited for checkerboard delimitations of this kind. The parcel sizes can be reliably reconstructed, they often correspond to known sizes used by Roman land surveyors, and they line up with neighboring Roman roads.⁸⁰ The relatively solid case that could be made for centuriation in this particular area, which lies outside our scope, has definitely influenced the work on much more dubious instances in central and southern Italy in the time of the conquest. Until recently, these reconstructions went essentially unchallenged and they have had a significant role in many assessments of the impact of Roman expansion.

Recent archeological and historical work has called into question the dominant views, opening an opportunity for a reconsideration of this important aspect of the general problem discussed in this chapter.⁸¹ In some

⁷⁶ E.g., in Schubert 1996: 43–65.

⁷⁷ At most, a lightly metalled line, and only for later contexts, e.g., Favory 1991; Whaley 2012. Synthesis in Chouquer 2008. This is in itself not surprising given that centuriation lines would certainly have not been very monumental in nature and very prone to disappearing.

⁷⁸ Chouquer and Favory 2001: 192–96.

⁷⁹ Among the many, it is enough to mention Salmon 1969; Roselaar 2010. A more discerning approach is in Chouquer 1987.

⁸⁰ Bussi 1983; Chevallier 1983. These traces are still very hard to date in any case.

⁸¹ In a radical way for instance in Dyson 2003.

cases, it is clear that the evidence for centuriation of any kind is simply too tenuous, limited to short tracts of modern alignments that are far apart from each other. Such is the case of the centuriation south of Alatri.⁸² In many other situations, the traces present a more compelling picture, but their chronology cannot in any way be established, or in any case is most likely much later.⁸³ It is not uncommon that overlapping grids based on different alignments are discernible and neither their absolute nor their relative chronology can be reliably determined. Some of those in Campania have been assigned to a time before the conquest, on the basis of the metric units used in them.⁸⁴ While this line of reasoning is certainly not unassailable, it underscores how unwise it is to assume that centuriations must necessarily date to the aftermath of the conquest. In many other instances, the metric units appear to be those used by the Romans but the lines could have been created centuries after the period in question, thus providing no indication of the immediate impact of expansionism.⁸⁵ There are virtually no areas in which a compelling argument can be made for widespread centuriation directly resulting from confiscations, colonizations, or assignments. At best, it can sometimes be conjectured as one of the possible explanations of the observed phenomenon. Too often, a date for the centuriation right after the colonial foundation is chosen only because it makes sense in the prevailing interpretive model, without any external confirmation.

Even aside from the chronological difficulties, there are also considerable uncertainties about the actual nature and function of centuriation. Especially where the evidence is fragmentary and scattered, it is entirely possible that only a part of the landscape had actually been centuriated. This might have involved rectifying some property boundaries and country roads but not all, nor even most of them. In this sense, it must be remembered that the hilly terrain in central and southern Italy is for the most part too irregular to be well suited to the imposition of any kind of orthogonal grid. In many cases, a parceling of this kind would inevitably produce lots crossed by drainage lines at odd angles or with slopes that would be impossible to plow. In each landscape, it would have only

⁸² Hinrichs 1974: 40–48.

⁸³ At this point, many scholars are arguing for a late start to centuriation in Italy, from the second century BCE onward. For Hinrichs (1974), it would have been introduced first in northern Italy in the late third century; on a similar line Moatti 1993.

⁸⁴ Pelgrom 2008.

⁸⁵ Various forms of gridding and redesigns of the landscape continued throughout the Roman period in Italy and it is often nearly impossible to determine what was done when. See a complete overview in Chouquer 1987.

been viable to grid the limited areas where slopes were gentler.⁸⁶ It is also possible that different parts of one landscape were aligned differently during the same centuriation event, or that an area was realigned later, or that the gridding progressed gradually.⁸⁷ Most importantly, it is far from self-evident what would happen to land use and ownership as a result of those centuriation events that actually took place. In and of itself, the shift of property boundaries did not necessarily involve a wholesale change in the ownership structure of the lands whose limits were being altered. Even under normal circumstances, boundary movements and ownership transfers on a small scale must have been a relatively common occurrence over time. It is entirely unproven that centuriation, even when it did really happen, resulted in an extensive revolution of the affected rural landscapes. Not all centuriation would have been associated with colonial land assignation, and, even in those cases, it has been shown that existing landowners would participate in the process. Further indications come from the study of centuriation in later periods, and especially from the case of Orange. At this site in southern France, maps apparently depicting a centuriated landscape were found carved on fragments of stone slabs. At least in that instance, the primary purpose of the creation of a grid on the landscape seems to be for purposes of tax assessment and ownership registry. This is indicated by the fact that many actual properties do not coincide with the rectangular parcels but instead span across centuriation lines.⁸⁸ Land surfaces would of course be much easier to calculate once some kind of grid had been superimposed on the existing boundaries. This would also greatly facilitate the keeping of a cadaster of property records, which was indispensable to political systems that were based on estate size for officeholding requirements.

In conclusion, it should be rather evident at this point that traces of centuriation in central and southern Italy do not provide any substantive support to views of the Roman conquest as having a high socioeconomic impact. Despite the strong claims made about the significance of centuriation, its actual remains are very evanescent, hard to date and interpolate into a complete pattern. Furthermore, the orthogonal grids that did exist do not automatically indicate a wholesale, radical change in land ownership in favor of conquering Romans, as envisioned in many traditional models.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ It is common to see drainage lines and even major streams crossing the ideal grid at odd angles, creating unviable parcels. Franciosi 1997; Chouquer 2010: 267–75.

⁸⁷ E.g., at Priverno or Lucera; Pelgrom 2008.

⁸⁸ Dyson 2003; Christol 2006.

⁸⁹ E.g., in Moatti 1997; Gabba 2003. And in many others before them.

Roads

Roman roads are often discussed with centuriation as highly visible and significant indicators of the impact that unification had outside the urban contexts. Together they are often taken as symbols of the complete reorganization of conquered lands, as well as a triumph over natural obstacles achieved by the new dominant power. The classic examples are those parts of the Po Plain, around Parma or Modena, where it is easy to paint road building, centuriation, and colonization as harmonic elements of a grand strategy deployed by Rome to change the landscape forever.⁹⁰ Unlike centuriation, however, the roads left tangible, indeed spectacular remains throughout the empire, contributing to the stock glorified image of Roman engineering and construction. This general discourse, whose critique transcends the scope of this book, has had a strong influence on views of early Roman expansion.⁹¹ In the study of early Roman roads, phenomena and concepts from later periods and far-away regions have been employed with little regard for the historical context. The reality is that road construction in the late fourth and third centuries BCE is very poorly documented and understood.

There is no doubt that later historical texts mention the construction of major inter-regional arteries soon after the beginning of the expansion process. The first such project was the Via Appia, which originally connected Rome with Capua and dated to the end of the fourth century. It would have been built at great expense during the years of Appius Claudius, a great builder also responsible for the first aqueduct of Rome, and named after him.⁹² Virtually all the roads that followed during the third century are associated in the same way with individual prominent politicians (see [Figure 6.7](#)). The situation on the ground must have been more complex, with construction spanning over decades and carried out incrementally.⁹³ Maintenance, upgrades, rectifications, and modifications must have been going on very frequently in different sections. The sociopolitical context in which these early roads were built is also poorly known and could easily have been misunderstood by historians writing in a period of standardized

⁹⁰ Nationalist overtones have often colored this received view. The work of P. Fraccaro in this sense is exemplary. His contribution to the Fascist *Mostra della Romanità* presented centuriation and road building in the Po Plain as a great triumph of Roman superiority; *Mostra* 1937; Arthurs 2012.

⁹¹ Mostly in connection with military interpretations of the function of Roman roads, an idea that was already in Mommsen; e.g., Vogt 1960: 172–98; Coarelli 1988.

⁹² MacBain 1980; Humm 1996.

⁹³ It is attested that the Via Appia was originally a gravel road and its paving was progressively improved in the course of the third century BCE; Laurence 1999: 13–21.

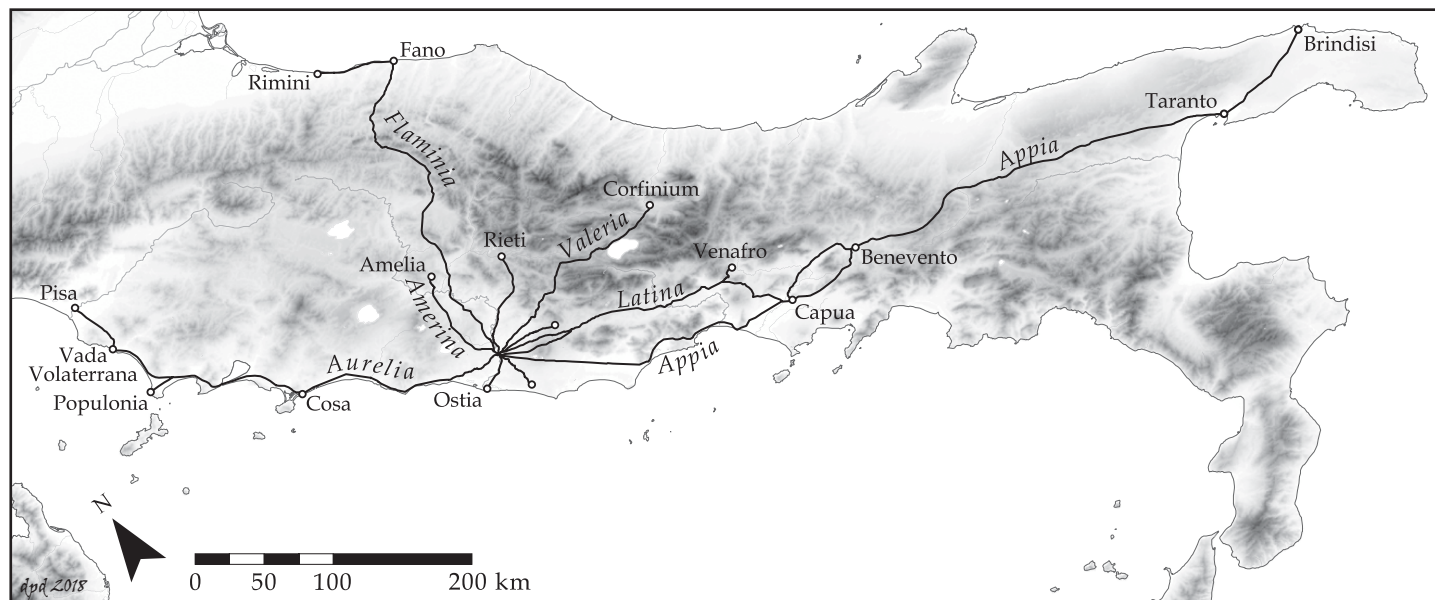


Figure 6.7 Map of the Roman roads built in the fourth and third centuries (after Quilici 1990; illustration by D. Diffendale).

imperial construction in politically unified lands. In the late fourth and third centuries, some degree of cooperation between the relevant allied communities would have been indispensable to the creation of the roads and to the safety of those traveling on them.

The archeological record provides much less help for this period than for later ones. The celebrated, beautifully preserved basalt-paved Roman roads stretching for miles do not belong in the time of the conquest. Those oft-photographed surfaces are typically the product of the last phases of construction and date to the second and third centuries CE.⁹⁴ Their foundation often obliterated or damaged (or in any case rendered inaccessible) the remains of the earliest versions of the same roads. Excavations that have reached the deeper levels are not common and have rarely produced extensively preserved stretches. The few known well-dated instances show far less imposing structures, often paved with plain gravel or local stone.⁹⁵ The overall appearance of the early roads is not easy to reconstruct, but they must have been much more heterogeneous than their later counterparts. They are clearly linked to local materials and conditions, rather than expressions of a grand design that was implemented centrally. Milestones, while relatively common in later periods, are exceedingly rare for the original period of construction. They contain very little information in any case.⁹⁶

Even granting the uncertainties about their nature and appearance, there can be no doubt that the creation of a network of roads in the late fourth and third centuries represented a major, innovative change in the very structure and topology of central and southern Italy. They required a sustained commitment and a massive financial outlay on the part of the central government and can be considered, together with colonial foundations, the most significant material transformation undertaken in the aftermath of the conquest. Thus it is not surprising that a lively debate about the function of Roman roads has been ongoing for decades. By far the oldest and most entrenched view is that the primary function of the roads was for military movement. Images of legions proudly marching on freshly built engineering marvels became part of the myth of a grand strategy inspiring Roman expansionism.⁹⁷ Criticism of this dominant idea has persuasively pointed out that the geometry of the network does not seem to be consistent with it.⁹⁸ The Via Appia, for one, was built only after firm

⁹⁴ E.g., Staccioli 2003; Zocchi 2009.

⁹⁵ Quilici 1992; Tol 2012: 14–16.

⁹⁶ Banzi 1999: 1–7.

⁹⁷ E. g., Keppie 1984.

⁹⁸ Bradley 2014.

local alliances, primarily with Capua, had been established and little additional military campaigning was foreseeable.⁹⁹ Similar observations can be made for the other main roads built immediately after the conquest. As we have seen, the bulk of the sustained campaigning effort in this period was deployed in the central Apennine regions and in other highlands, which ended up being precisely the least served areas in the new network.¹⁰⁰ Most of the roads were created in thickly urbanized areas that were actually those that offered the least amount of resistance to the expansion, and where elite networks were most active. It can be added that troop movements were in any case too large and unpredictable. If anything, roads leading to highly unstable areas could facilitate raids coming in the opposite direction, reducing the time available for a Roman response.

The other common explanation offered as a rationale has to do with the increased trading activities of the fourth and third centuries in central and southern Italy. Predictably favored by those who see Roman economy as very advanced, this theory is connected with materialistic models for Roman expansion, just like the military one is favored by aggressive expansionists.¹⁰¹ Consequently, it is open to the same kind of valid criticism leveled at economic imperialism, primarily centered on the scarce evidence that conquest leaders had major commercial interests.¹⁰² Additionally, it should be considered that overland trade in this region was far less significant than seaborne one. The surface costs of moving goods across the landscape remained prohibitive even after roads were built. It has been estimated that even at the height of the Roman Empire there was a proportion of seven to one between land-based and maritime transport costs.¹⁰³ This meant that it would only have been viable to transport objects that had high value and small mass over long distances by road. On the whole, it appears highly unlikely that the commercial benefit of conquest-era roads could even begin to repay the vast investment that they required. The prevailing taxation systems at this time were land and harbor based, so larger commercial revenues would have had a limited impact on the treasury.

As a general consideration, it should be noted that, while very different in other ways, the military and economic explanations for the construction of roads both focus exclusively on the agency of the Roman state. The situation was instead far more nuanced. Long-range lines of communication

⁹⁹ Laurence 1999: 13–21.

¹⁰⁰ See p. 150.

¹⁰¹ E.g., Chevallier 1972: 306; Radke 1981.

¹⁰² See pp. 26–27.

¹⁰³ Laurence 1999: 95–108; Horden and Purcell 2000.

had been connecting neighboring cities for centuries before the conquest, and they had been improved over time.¹⁰⁴ This must have required a degree of collaboration among elites of different states, despite the diffuse raiding warfare that was typical of the preconquest period. Maintenance and improvements would of course be made difficult by the fragmented political conditions. But there is clear evidence that, especially in the hinterland of major cities, considerable investment was made in road building, including the construction of deep trenches in the bedrock and bridges.¹⁰⁵ These developments, which characterized the sixth to fourth centuries, certainly constituted, both technologically and organizationally, a foundation on which later Roman roads were able to innovate. The creation of these great works arguably represented the fulfillment of an aspiration that many of the people served by them had been working toward for some time, rather than the imposition of a completely new and bewildering concept. It thus could be surmised, as had been the case before the unification, that the collaboration of elites controlling the relevant areas contributed to the realization of the great works. In this sense it is significant that road construction often exhibits similar lineage-specific geographic patterns as those argued for the military interventions. The Claudii, for instance, again display an interest for the areas south of Rome, which demonstrates that the construction of roads was often negotiated along the same factional lines that facilitated political incorporation. Road construction was yet another way of creating patronage links with local elites.¹⁰⁶

The central government in Rome appears to have been trying to offer tangible evidence of the benefits that unification could bring. Very quickly on the heels of expansion, it hastened to promote the creation of something that satisfied an existing need of the entire region but that could not be achieved in this form without the increased political integration that was being promoted at the time. In this way, the Roman magistrates also reinvested (and, in a sense, redistributed) a significant portion of the profits that had been concentrating in Rome as a result of the conquest process. This contributed to rebalance the centripetal flow of resources that was being produced by looting, tribute, taxation, and especially elite movement to Rome. Another vast improvement over previous conditions was the greater safety that travelers could enjoy. Significantly built on a strip of Roman land confiscated for the purpose, the roads fell under the

¹⁰⁴ Boitani 1985; Quilici 1992; Carlà-Uhink 2017: 70–75.

¹⁰⁵ Quilici Gigli 1996.

¹⁰⁶ Very effective discussion in MacBain 1980.

competence of the Roman army, which could patrol them without having to ask the allies' permission or to declare war. A few major policing actions are mentioned in historical accounts, but it is likely that many more smaller interventions were carried out and went unrecorded.¹⁰⁷

The question of the primary function of Roman roads in the late fourth and third centuries needs to be looked at with fresh eyes and in the light of the body of new theories about the conquest as a whole. It is imperative to assess whose travels were important enough at the time to justify the investment. While it is possible that each of the roads had its own specific local significance, there are some considerations that appear relevant for most of them. It should be observed right away that their overall geometry is clearly primarily aimed at the urbanized and thickly populated areas of western central Italy, with Rome of course proverbially at its center. It has been remarked how some major Etruscan centers, like Caere or Tarquinia, were by-passed in the process,¹⁰⁸ but there can be no doubt that the network as a whole was skewed in favor of the city-rich coastal strips of central Italy. These are precisely the areas of provenance of many non-Roman elites that were joining the expanding new polity. This is where elite negotiation and collaboration was most evident, in contrast with the highlands that were more reluctant to be incorporated. With their smooth, hard metal, the roads clearly benefited more significantly people traveling on wheels (and to a lesser degree on horseback). Any other pedestrians and animals would have been able to move on rougher, softer surfaces with similar ease. Aside from trade in small valuables, carts, chariots, and saddle horses were mostly used for elite movement, which appears to have been a key purpose of early road construction. Central and southern Italian aristocrats had always been very mobile, and as a result of political integration they were probably traveling much more. Many families needed to be in Rome often, or had moved to Rome in part or completely. Maintaining close contacts with their areas of origin, as we have seen, was essential to their political success. Moreover, many of them were acquiring property and patronage in disparate locations, while long-distance intermarriage was on the rise too.¹⁰⁹

It is therefore tempting to see elite movement as a more important purpose of early road construction than military campaigning or long-distance bulk trade. The commitment of Roman magistrates (many of whom were from non-Roman families) to expensive road construction,

¹⁰⁷ The repression of brigandage in central Italy is attested as an consular mission in 303; Livy, Yardley, and Hoyos 2013: 227 (=Liv. 10.1.4–6); see also, Shaw 1984.

¹⁰⁸ Wiseman 1970; Potter 1979.

¹⁰⁹ Münzer 1920: 50–51.

in this perspective, could well be yet another aspect of the elite interaction that was playing such a large role in the overall expansion process. Rather than a symbol of Roman domination and control, early roads can be conceptualized as an effective tool to bring elites together, while at the same time offering tangible proof of what unification could make possible. Their bidirectional nature is actually an apt material correlate for a process whose nature was two-way on so many other levels. Moreover, like many other central policies, this one too was deployed at the interstices between existing city governments. It undoubtedly represented a major change, but it was one that did not interfere deeply with local autonomies, while at the same time accomplishing something that went well beyond their individual capabilities. Building on existing ties and connections, it facilitated greatly intensified interaction within a common sociopolitical arena.

Citizenship and Law

Roman citizenship has tended to be understood as a progressively expanding universal political status and therefore as a straightforward vehicle for gradual assimilation. Projecting back elements that are typical of later periods of the empire (and also of modern nation-states), many scholars considered Roman citizenship as the only significant status that could be possessed and desired. In this view, the spread of citizenship in central and southern Italy during the period of the unification would be a clear indicator of growing Roman political power and control.¹¹⁰ In the fourth and third centuries, however, the process was very heterogeneous and could have different functions. The baseline was that, before the expansion, all cities and most other complex polities had their own citizenship system, with lists that were used for elections and taxation. Such statuses were mutually exclusive, aside from the rare cases of dual or multiple citizenships. Cities could grant some rights to individual aliens, typically for honorary reasons, or to have them help represent the polity in diplomatic contexts. Entire communities could also exchange some (or even all) of the privileges of citizenship, to foster friendship and facilitate interactions.¹¹¹ Once again, a thick network of links across different Italian polities had existed for centuries before the conquest began, and it helped shape the course that the new process took. Old and familiar

¹¹⁰ E. g., Sherwin-White 1973; Nicolet 1980.

¹¹¹ Elwyn 1993; Burton 2011.

political tools were given a new function and a broadened scope in the changing landscape.

In its expansion in central Italy, Rome started making creative use of existing forms of rights distributions to aliens, and several intermediate forms of citizenship were based on them. They involved such rights as the one to marry, to enter into contracts, to inherit wealth, and even to move to Rome, while generally excluding electoral privileges.¹¹² These grants could be used as bargaining chips in the negotiation over the terms of incorporation, and they were offered to communities, lineages, and individuals who had typically helped a Roman general in one way or another. These people, already factionally linked to Roman aristocrats, would of course be interested in having a greater stake in the new political formation.¹¹³ While originally conceived as mutual, in the new role that Rome was acquiring it was of course its citizenship that was the real currency. These rights, for elites in allied communities, would have made it easier to deal with Romans and even to transfer to Rome and enter the political game there. Full citizenship could also be granted to people moving to Rome, building on an established earlier tradition of acceptance, in which Rome had long excelled even by contemporary standards. In the unification, the phenomenon assumed vast proportions, as we saw when we looked at foreign families rising to leadership positions.¹¹⁴ Growing numbers of neighboring elites, from Latium, who had the traditional right to resettle there, but from elsewhere, too, converged on the booming city. Additionally, there were less common instances of wholesale incorporation of polities, as was the case of Veii. All these processes obviously contributed to the growth of Rome but also to a radical change of its makeup and nature, greatly diluting the original traits of its polity.

Citizenship rights were also extended, on a much bigger scale than ever before, to people who were not necessarily going to move to Rome. Over time, this created a whole new and parallel level of political interaction, above that of individual polities, which remained in place. The grantees were in the first instance citizens of their own city and then, additionally, they could have partial or complete Roman rights. At this stage, having the citizenship of Rome was neither an ethnic indication nor the standard attribute of all free individuals within a territorial state. It instead brought with it better access to the new global political game, while maintaining the

¹¹² Synthesis in Humbert 1978. Critique in Mouritsen 2007.

¹¹³ Sherwin-White 1973: 35–50.

¹¹⁴ See pp. 184–85.

customary privileges at home. The various degrees of Roman citizenship granted specific legal and political rights that made it progressively easier to enter into dealings with people in other communities. Full citizenship gave a significant stake in the electoral and decision-making process in Rome, even to families that had not relocated there but only came in for the yearly elections.¹¹⁵ Colonists were an integral part of this system, since they were citizens of the colony first, and then also enjoyed full or partial citizenship of Rome (see [Figure 6.8](#)).

In an apparent paradox, the ones who remained citizens of only one polity were the original Romans themselves. Since Rome itself never clearly separated the government of the city from that of the empire, it created a situation in which growing numbers of Italians who did not live there had a say not only in global matters but also in the most internal affairs of the city. This did not happen to any other city of the alliance and represents a strong indication that Rome transformed itself into the administrative center of a territorial state and abandoned completely its old nature of autonomous city-based polity. In practice, this meant accepting that little, if anything, of its internal dynamics were independent from general Italian politics. The very word Roman ceased to indicate the inhabitants of a city and was reused for a radically different purpose. The people that had always been Roman were of course automatically endowed with a somewhat privileged status within the alliance, but they were also the only ones who made the greatest sacrifice in terms of their political identity. This process was arguably a much deeper sociopolitical transformation than anything other Italian cities had to undergo during the conquest.

Distinguishing between the level of empire-wide political interactions from that of city-based ones is also extremely helpful to understanding the legal sphere in central and southern Italy in the time of the unification. Needless to say, the image of Romans as lawgivers, to other Italians and to the whole ancient world and to Western culture in general, is part and parcel of a deeply seated modern perception. Like citizenship, the spread of Roman law has been seen as an indicator of direct political control.¹¹⁶ But once again a close examination of the period in question reveals more complex and composite patterns. For centuries after the conquest, allied communities essentially retained their own individual legal and judicial systems, which they had been evolving since the early first millennium. There was no will on the part of Rome to impose its laws on incorporated

¹¹⁵ Taylor 1960.

¹¹⁶ Synthesis and review of the literature in Capogrossi Colognesi 2014.

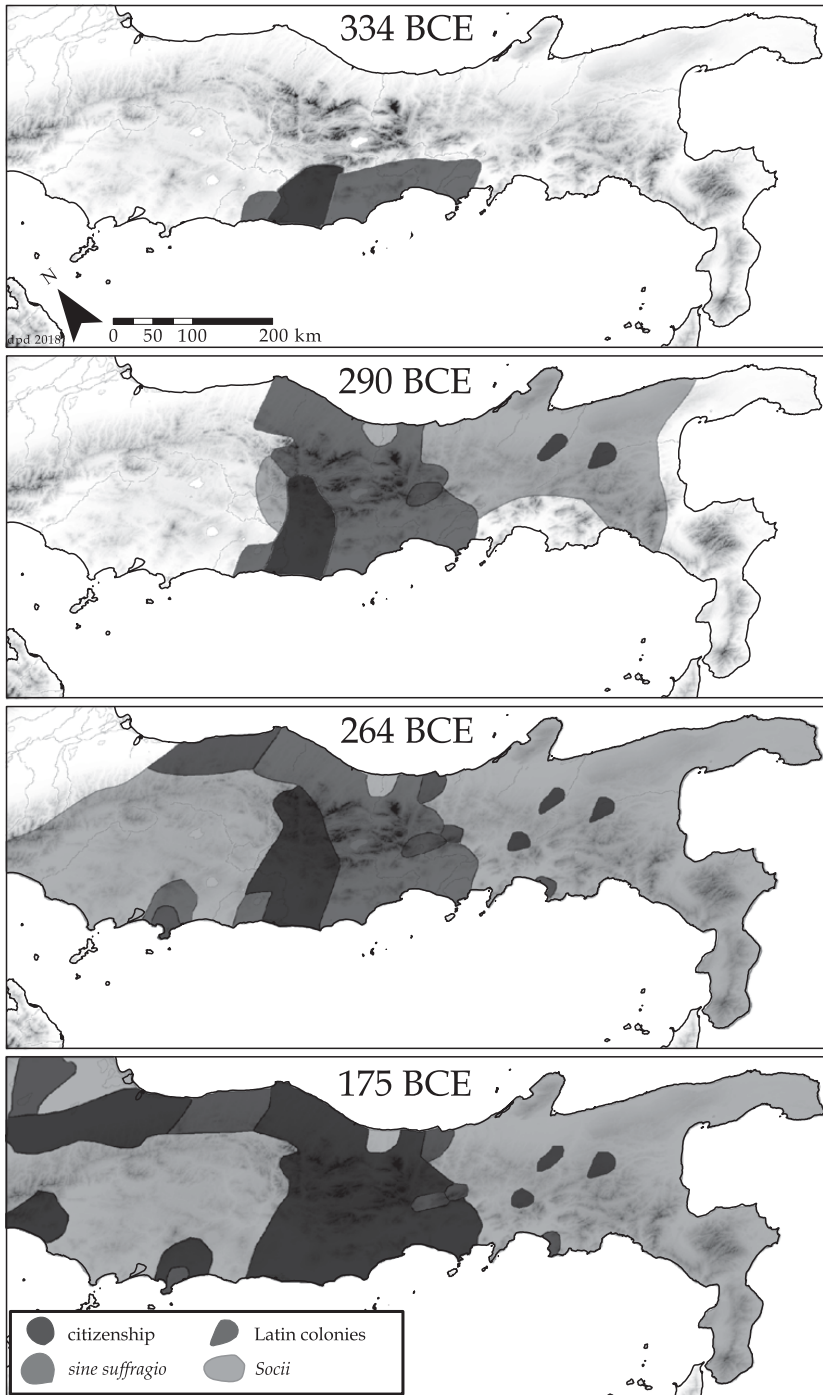


Figure 6.8 Map showing the distribution of citizenship grants in Italy (after Humbert 1984; illustration by D. Diffendale).

polities, nor were there the administrative or coercive tools that would have been necessary to accomplish this goal.¹¹⁷ Roman statutes primarily bound the citizens in Rome and only progressively those elsewhere, and mostly for cases that went beyond the scope of jurisdiction of individual cities. Even colonies of full citizens passed their own laws, which could be at variance with those of Rome.¹¹⁸ The result was a babel of different legal systems that continued to exist long after the unification.

Only in the course of the third century did the reach of laws passed in Rome slowly grow, apace with the spread of full citizenship, and an embryonic judicial system run by Rome came into existence. Allied communities could adopt specific Roman acts into their codes, picking and choosing those that suited them best.¹¹⁹ During this long period, the Roman code continued to evolve rather quickly, with fundamental new laws being constantly added and old ones abrogated. This was done primarily by the senate in Rome, where Italian elites had a rapidly growing presence and influence, and by the voting assemblies, stacked and controlled by wide-ranging factional networks.¹²⁰ This meant that for generations non-Roman aristocratic lineages, often enfranchised early on, could influence the production of new legislation in Rome, often before it would even apply in their communities of origin. In other words, there was ample time for them to negotiate an empire-wide code that would be tolerable for most members of the alliance. It follows that Roman law was not imposed from above in Italy, but it was instead created together and gradually introduced in each polity through the interaction of elites of different backgrounds. To this important consideration one must add that, according to recent research on the effective reach of law even in Rome itself, the impact that it would have had in the rest of the empire was reduced even further.¹²¹ This is because there were social contexts in which Roman law was not applied or enforced. Within families and lineages, for instance, recourse to outside conflict resolution was rare, while for the lower classes access to the courts was difficult for other reasons. Customary laws and practices persisted for centuries and are sometimes referenced in the official codes.¹²² The same could be

¹¹⁷ The extent of Roman jurisdiction outside citizen communities is much debated. Discussion in Mouritsen 1998: 42–52.

¹¹⁸ Bispham 2006a.

¹¹⁹ A process later called *fundifactio*; Saumagne 1965. The central government also introduced magistrates that resolved conflicts between Roman and non-Roman citizens; Daube 1951; Brennan 2000: 85–97.

¹²⁰ Taylor 1966; Muccigrosso 1998: 61–68.

¹²¹ Capogrossi Colognesi 2014: 140–48.

¹²² E.g., Harries 2013.

surmised, incidentally, for the statutes of the other Italian polities, even if there is little evidence to prove it. In short, the primary space regulated by written laws was that of disputes between different elites groups, or between them and the polities they belonged to. While these kinds of issues became much more frequent with the conquest and its aftermath, because of the vastly increased interaction, they remained a limited subset of the whole society. In this as in other areas, the main effect of the conquest was the very significant increase and broadening of an already existing level of elite interaction. In this sense, Roman laws, among other things, helped regulate long-distance relationships, progressively filling in the gaps between local jurisdictions. This of course facilitated the elite negotiation and clustering that was the basis of the whole unification process.

Another related area in which the impact of the conquest has been highlighted is that of the constitutions of the incorporated polities. While extant city charters for the period in question are virtually nonexistent, the increasing appearance of local magistrates with Roman titles, such as praetor or quaestor, has been hailed as a clear sign of strong central influence.¹²³ It is certain, however, that Rome did not impose its own political terminology in the allied communities (even colonies had their own peculiar system) and some cities, like Naples, never adopted it.¹²⁴ It is also evident that in some cases these officeholders did not have the same functions that their homonymous had in Rome. In any case, it is essential to remember that what really matters is who held the power, not what name they took. Rome did not appoint any local magistrates, not even in its own colonies, and the political game remained firmly in the hands of locals. In this perspective, the meaning of the convergence of standardized office titles and, to a lesser extent, their attributions probably served the purpose of making local governments more compatible and comparable with each other. As individual political careers more and more frequently spanned different polities, it would have made it easier to monitor that progression from lesser to greater office that was an integral part of contemporary practices.¹²⁵ In other words, this was yet another element that fostered increased horizontal elite mobility, rather than a top-down administrative reorganization. Moreover, standardized city charters would help strengthen the power of landed aristocrats, who were favored by them, across the alliance against mounting social upheaval. With a little sacrifice of their traditional peculiarities and

¹²³ E.g., Salmon 1982. More balanced views in Campanile and Letta 1979; Torelli 2000.

¹²⁴ Miranda 1990; Lomas 2016.

¹²⁵ Many examples can be found in Panciera 1982; see also pp. 184–88.

terminology, local elites were able to gain higher compatibility within the alliance, ease of interaction, and political stability.

Economy

In the schools of thought based on materialism, the overall economic impact of the conquest would be the ultimate indicator of its nature. The transfer of the means of production to Rome would be the real power shift at the root of everything else. Confiscations and enslavements (and looting to a lesser extent) would alter radically the economic landscape of central and southern Italy, leading to a productive and commercial boom that disproportionately benefited the Romans.¹²⁶ On the strength of the deconstruction of these processes carried out in the previous sections of this chapter, it is possible to question these views and advance a very different picture. In terms of land-based resources, which arguably represent the majority of the overall economy, very little change is detectable as a result of the unification. The network of small farms and other nonelite rural sites that came into existence before the conquest continued to exist largely unaltered, and no obvious new form of land exploitation was introduced. Only in the third century BCE and in some areas, larger farming establishments involved in the production of wine and oil on a substantial scale made their appearance in significant quantities.¹²⁷ It should also be remembered, however, that this agricultural structure clearly represented a significant intensification over the situation of the sixth or fifth century BCE. The greater availability of food surplus would have allowed an increase in the proportion of nonfood producing specialists. This fundamental change is likely to have been instrumental in making possible the second wave of urbanization that invested Italy around the same time. Indeed it may have had a role in fueling the expansion process, in a reversal of the causal link that is traditionally established.

The way in which surplus was extracted from the land-based productive activities seems to have been rooted in traditional social forms of dependence, such as share-cropping, tenant farming, and patronage. Combining the lack of evidence for a monetary economy or for real markets with the widespread survival of landed aristocrats, it is hard to escape the conclusion

¹²⁶ E.g., Giardina and Schiavone 1981; Carandini 1988.

¹²⁷ Discussion in Becker and Terrenato 2012. See also the case of the origins of amphora production and circulation in Italy, Olcese 2004; Olcese 2010.

that local elites controlled access to most agricultural resources thanks to long-established privileges. They acted as political brokers for their dependents and were rewarded with customary contributions and loyalty.¹²⁸ Surplus extraction may have increased at this time, but this was certainly offset by the overall economic benefits that the conquest produced, such as the end of raiding and lowered surface costs. The small farms, as archeology now shows, continued to significantly rise above subsistence throughout their span of occupation, even after the share for the elites was subtracted.¹²⁹ They were included in the circulation of fine wares, like black glaze pottery, that did not reach them before, but this did not alter their economy in a major way.¹³⁰ They constituted a very stable and sustainable human landscape that underpinned the whole Italian economy and was not overly affected by fluctuations in long-distance trade or financial turmoil. Indeed it survived in many areas down to the end of the western Roman Empire, and sometimes beyond. Together, these farmers and the elites they were connected to represented a self-replicating symbiotic system that acted as a counterweight to what was happening in other parts of the economy.

Evidence from urban contexts across Italy primarily shows that there was a significant increase in manufacturing and trading activities in the period in question. As is the case with farming, this economic dynamism does not appear to have been a direct consequence of the conquest, since it makes its appearance independently of local political change. Prestige goods were produced in larger quantities and with greater standardization, and transported over longer distances.¹³¹ The elites themselves redirected a lot of their conspicuous consumption from the dead-end accumulation of princely burials to private luxury and public munificence, which did not remove resources forever from circulation. The expansion of urbanism, with the construction of many new city walls and temples in new and existing cities, further added to the growing manufacturing sector. All this led to the growth in the number of social actors, like craftsmen, merchants, builders, moneylenders, and other related specialists, who were distinct from the traditional agricultural structure. This global process may have

¹²⁸ Full argument in Terrenato 1998b.

¹²⁹ Motta, Camin, and Terrenato 1993; Camin and McCall 2002; Vaccaro, et al. 2013; Bowes, et al. 2017. This evidence, by the way, is in sharp contrast with all those reconstructions that saw these farmers as marginals barely scraping together their livelihood.

¹³⁰ The increase in market products and the fluctuations of some non-essential commodity prices did not affect farmers too much. The proof of this is that when the long-distance networks supplying them collapse, this does not threaten the subsistence of primary producers.

¹³¹ Morel 2007; Jongman 2017.

had a role in the increasing social unrest that was discussed earlier in this book, where it is argued that it drove territorial expansion rather than being driven by it.¹³²

There are, however, some economic processes that were undeniably triggered by the Roman expansion and that affected the overall picture. Aside from those already discussed in reference to looting, enslavement, and confiscation, it was of course the case that the end of raiding warfare and the curbing of piracy and brigandism would have made the life of small farmers (especially those involved in tree-based cultivation), traders, and other travelers much easier. Transaction and surface costs of many economic activities would have been significantly reduced, giving a powerful boost to production and exchange (see [Figure 6.9](#)). The increase in the size of armed forces on all sides spurred the production of extra food surplus, weapons, army supplies, and much else. The very machinery of the new territorial empire created and expanded socioeconomic opportunities, since it required tax farmers, army suppliers, generals and officers, bureaucrats, and commissioners.¹³³ Furthermore, the greatly increased role of cities as vehicles for aristocratic advancement stimulated peer competition and vastly increased private munificence. Unification allowed elites to play the new political game with more resources, and these cash-producing activities ultimately fueled and supported the intensified interaction that had become necessary.¹³⁴ Another important impact was the colossal amount of resources now spent on infrastructure projects. Roads, bridges, and aqueducts were built, new harbors were created, swamps were drained, and land was irrigated, all supported by the finances of the emerging imperial center. In all likelihood, policies of this kind were an integral and important part of how expansion was made acceptable to its participants. Membership in a large territorial alliance allowed the realization of projects, like wide-ranging roads, that were beyond the reach of individual communities, however rich and powerful. These capital-intensive activities also redistributed the wealth siphoned off to Rome back to Italian communities, helping to rebalance the economic convergence toward the center.

The relatively stable, self-replicating world of farming, livestock raising, pastoralism, fishing, and other land-based activities was not overly affected by the economic changes that happened elsewhere, judging from the archaeological evidence. That conservative world was spatially juxtaposed with

¹³² See pp. 105–7.

¹³³ Morley 2006; Perry 2016.

¹³⁴ Mostly in the realm of temple construction; Orlin 1997.

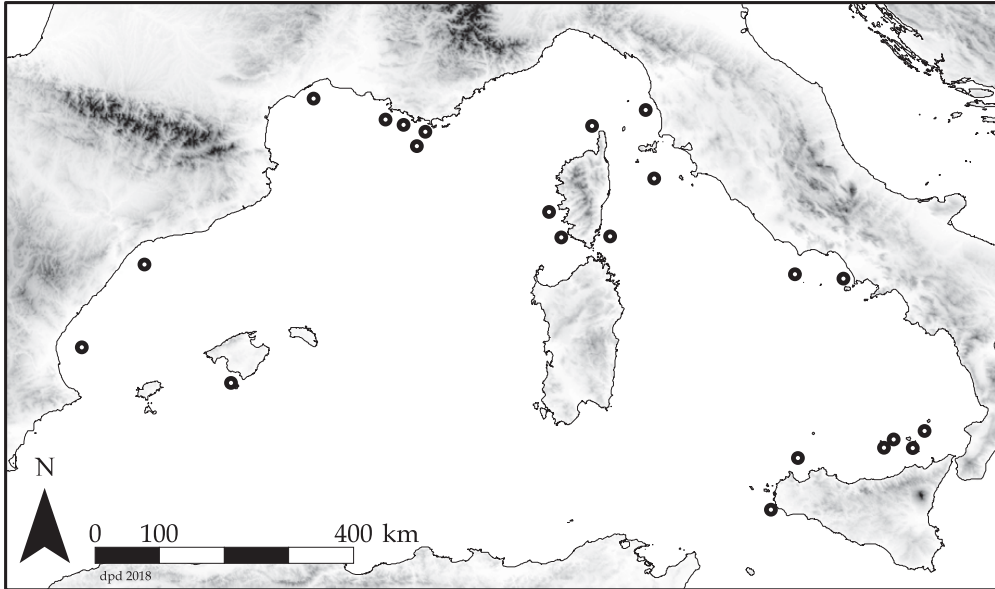


Figure 6.9 Map showing the distribution of shipwrecks datable to fourth and third centuries in the western Mediterranean. They are much more frequent than earlier shipwrecks, indicating a significant increase of the seaborne trade in the region (after Olcese 2017; illustration by D. Diffendale).

another system of economic interaction, and their coexistence side by side was one of the most important dimensions of Italian heterogeneity. A form of economic rationality existed at the same time as productive behaviors that were deeply embedded in customary social practices. There were only a small minority of areas and contexts in which a strong economic intensification took place, both before and after the conquest. Their distribution was obviously concentrated in large cities and other long-distance hubs such as harbors, gateways, and major military bases.¹³⁵ It was a sort of thin, very active network intertwined with the rest of the economic world. The possible existence of a structure of this kind is problematic for classic materialist theories, which postulate that each market system was characterized by only one mode of production. More recent thought, however, makes room for different economic mentalities that coexist and interact, but also remaining largely independent, so that fluctuations in one do not automatically transmit to the other.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Overviews in Morel 1989; Morel 2007.

¹³⁶ A possibility already envisioned in some materialist approaches; Carandini 1979. See also Hatzfeld 1919.

When looking at the social makeup after the conquest, similar considerations can be made to those valid for the economy. On the one hand, traditional roles and behaviors persisted in the vast majority of the unified lands, but, on the other, significant change was perceptible, especially in urban contexts. The increase in production and trade that took place before the conquest, combined with the mentioned effects and needs created by the empire, led to an unprecedented growth of specialists not connected with primary food production. This in turn prompted the appearance of entirely new social figures, active in fields as disparate as financial services and theater, construction and medicine, transport and education. Many of the characters involved in these new lines of business were offered an unprecedented opportunity for rapid monetary enrichment, which further altered the traditional social fabric. There were other urban contexts in the eastern Mediterranean that had large cash-oriented sectors before, of course, and in some ways central Italy was simply catching up to them. But it was also true that the epicenter of some long-distance, highly sophisticated, and profit-driven activities was slowly shifting west as a result of the greater integration of Italian communities. Their unification led to the creation of a number of relatively stable economic niches and links that made a significant growth of these monetary sectors of the economy possible.

Rome was one obvious early focus of this phenomenon, with its expanding number of bureaucrats, importers, and retailers, but also artists, cooks, entertainers, parasites, and priests of strange cults. The unique role and the sheer size of the capital had a distorting effect on the city itself and its hinterland, which was dotted with more intensive farming establishments, the occasional elite rural residence, workshops, rich tombs, road stations, commercial depots, and other entities. Similar transformations, on a much smaller scale, are visible in other hot spots along the western coast of central Italy. It is essential to remember that these opportunities for enrichment were not offered exclusively to Romans, however. Many of the emerging figures in the capital originated elsewhere, and in some areas, such as trade, there is clear evidence that families from other communities were more successful than those based in Rome.¹³⁷ Thus the economic benefits of the expansion did not go disproportionately to those who nominally were the promoters of it. Instead, just like political power, they ended up being shared across a vast constituency of elites and aspiring elites. Also such overall socioeconomic change concentrated tightly in a few

¹³⁷ Morris 1980.

urban and coastal enclaves, leaving the bulk of the communities substantially unaffected. Both these processes must have been a desirable element of the unification for many Italian aristocratic families, since it offered them new opportunities without undermining their traditional privileges.

In the few economically hyperactive pockets, however, real and fundamental change did happen. The ethos of the new actors in them could break with traditional patterns and have serious consequences for the local cultural and social structure. Optimizing behaviors and monetization could undermine existing mentalities, breaking down the customary links that kept elites and commoners together. Potentially, a new world began coming into existence, in which it was possible to get by without patronage or prestige but simply through wealth and display. On top of this, there were growing numbers of culturally uprooted individuals floating around the unified lands, and they tended to merge with these new social formations. Dispossessed peasants, freed slaves, and army veterans, who would normally be reabsorbed in traditional communities, could now gravitate toward and add to the chaotic bustle. Moreover, the very nature of the political game in Rome, requiring large numbers of voters for the opposed factions, further expanded the scope of the phenomenon and provided vital support for it. The landed elites across Italy that started the empire probably had no idea that something like this would happen. Their alliance, on the contrary, was precisely aimed at mitigating social unrest and reinforcing traditional loyalties. From a certain point of view, these goals were achieved, since most of Italy remained socially stable, but in some crucial spots, in the very joints of the imperial body, things started to take an unexpected turn, leading to the turmoil of the first century BCE. This, however, was a very late and unintended consequence of Italian unification and it should not teleologically influence our interpretation of the phenomenon. The immediate economic and social impact of the conquest was limited to a few specific areas and contexts and cannot in any way be constructed as its ultimate purpose or even its main consequence.

Conclusions

When the directly visible effects of the conquest in central and southern Italy are assessed without preconception, it is hard to come to the conclusion that a revolution took place. The evidence, when available, tends instead to show a picture of slow global change, of refunctionalization of existing elements, and of limited areas and contexts where the disruption was serious. Much

of the visible change was not directly instigated by the central government but rather appears to have been the result of local developments and unintended consequences. The people in power at Rome would not have had the resources or tools to produce fundamental structural changes in the incorporated communities. Even if they did, such change would have counterproductive results for the alliance of landed elites that dominated the political scene, and it would in all likelihood have made unification much less palatable to the people who were entering it. The few active policies that were deployed from the center, such as the foundation of colonies or the construction of roads, were carefully selected to reinforce the expansionist project, by benefiting the aristocratic networks that were running it in Rome and elsewhere, without creating too much discontent in other social groups. It was a delicate balancing act that would have been completely ruined by brutal and oppressive political strategies. The action of the central government was focused on the interstices between the spheres of control on the individual polities that were members of the alliance. These were spaces that were previously unregulated and whose reorganization could help long-distance interactions, especially for elites and for traders.

While it has sometimes been argued that the ultimate effect of the conquest was the apparently homogenous Italy of the first century CE, it is hard to establish clear causal links across such large spans of time. Some unintended and long-term consequences of the expansion may have created radically new outcomes far down the line, but these cannot be used to explain the nature of the conquest at the time it happened. These teleological approaches underplay the specificity of the period of the expansion and ignore the limited horizon that the actors involved would have had. It is essential not to project back in time the conditions or the concerns that prevailed many centuries after the fact, even if we are better informed about them. The process must be evaluated in its own right and in terms that made sense with the information that was available at the time. When this is done, it appears that the situation in central and southern Italy after the conquest is essentially compatible with a model that regards wide-ranging elite interaction and negotiation as the primary factors that drove the transition.

The Roman conquest of Italy is one of the great themes of the Western historiographical tradition.¹ Narrated and reinvented countless times, dissected and reconstructed in myriad different formats and mediums, it has never ceased to have a preeminent place among the foundational narratives of modern Europe. As is only to be expected, each successive generation has produced an account of it that best suited the prevailing ideological needs of its time. And yet over the centuries there have been a few essential elements that have tended to become crystallized and taken for granted. They are like pillars that support a dominant narrative that can be retold in various forms but cannot be radically subverted, lest its underlying political message be nullified. This book poses an open challenge to some of these fundamental assumptions. One such axiom is the construction of the Romans as a compact ethnic group, and another is their role as uncontested protagonists in the drama of the conquest. The agency of the Romans is seen as perfectly coherent, and it is the only one that matters in the end. Roman predominance in Italy would be unrivaled and underpinned by a vast military and organizational superiority. In this view, the conquest was a natural event and it produced a territorial empire that was unified in its essential traits and kept together primarily by threat of force. Such a laden perception of the Roman Empire made it an ideal source of inspiration for early modern nation-states dealing with reluctant local communities and ethnic minorities. It is still the case that most current explanations for the emergence of the empire focus almost exclusively on the Romans and on their motivations, as if their actions and reactions represented the only variable in the process. From idealists to materialists, the focus has shifted from the aggressiveness of Roman leaders to the greediness of Roman entrepreneurs, but the eye of the historian has seldom strayed far enough to look at what non-Romans were doing. Their secondary role is essentially a passive one, at the receiving end of a violent conquest and pervasive acculturation. After many centuries in which the historical narratives have been built

¹ This chapter builds on the evidence discussed in the previous ones, so references will be omitted except in the few cases in which new topics are introduced.

upon these unquestioned assumptions, they have become so embedded as to become invisible and thus hard to dislodge. It is like sediment that has slowly deposited at the bottom of our intellectual reservoirs and now appears as an immovable floor to us. Such accretions form a baseline that is taken as a self-evident point of departure and that instead severely limits the range of our interpretations in fundamental ways.

In the chapters of this book, a quantity and variety of material has been summarized in support of a tentative new reconstruction of the unification of central and southern Italy during the fourth and third centuries BCE. The views expressed here depart considerably from most current views in a number of ways, not simply in their substantive conclusions but also in the historiographic tools, the level of discourse, and the terminology that have been adopted. For instance, ethnic groups and states have not been taken to be the primary agents, as they have been almost always in the past. The focus is placed instead on less abstract entities, such as individuals, lineages, and factions. The key point that is being argued is that unified Roman Italy, by the end of the period in question, was the result of a grand bargain negotiated between some specific actors across ethnic and state lines, more than anything else. A key role in this was played by landed elites, and in this process many (but by no means all) non-Roman lineages were willing or only slightly reluctant participants, when not initiators. This rich and heterogeneous process of negotiation produced a compromise that allowed those aristocratic groups who decided to be involved to retain most of their traditional privileges, while at the same time expanding considerably their range of action and their influence. Therefore it is no longer sufficient to explain the complex transformation that goes under the name of Roman imperialism by simply invoking traits or behaviors displayed by the original inhabitants of Rome. Innate aggressiveness, internal political competition, defensive fears, greed, anger, overpopulation (just to mention some alleged Roman traits that recur in the literature as prime movers for imperialism) cannot explain the unification in a satisfactory way, because they leave out entire constituencies of great significance and size. Without them, the global transformation would never have happened. Instead a majority of Italian elites, in one way or another, were involved in interactions in which personal and political networking was far more important than abstract ethnic or state loyalties. This is, evidently, a reconstruction that flies in the face of most dominant narratives, including some written only a few centuries after the facts, and that is, in several points, admittedly based on circumstantial evidence. In some areas, the proposed mechanisms are inferred on the basis of indirect outcomes, while in others they fit in better with

the overall archeological and historical picture. The main strength of what is proposed here derives from the combination of evidence and indicators pointing in the same direction within a variety of different datasets, including many material and epigraphic ones that had not been systematically incorporated and made to interact before.

While this book focuses on the first two centuries of the conquest in central and southern Italy, it is also founded on the belief that those events can only be understood when they are properly contextualized in the long-term history that preceded them, as well as in a broader Mediterranean perspective. The system of landed elites that is at the center of the reconstruction proposed here traced its origins in the very early part of the first millennium BCE, if not before. The presence of extended aristocratic lineages in these early times can be inferred from archeological evidence and from historical memories, and their persistence and flourishing growth characterize the entire history of the area in the period under consideration and beyond. Aristocratic extended kin groups lived together in fortified villages and fought together in small-scale raids. A tight corporate loyalty linked their members together. These actors were linked to social dependents at various levels and had very complex internal dynamics. There was peer competition at the elite level and there was social tension between the ranks. Nevertheless, these aristocrats had leader status and controlled access to resources, while generally acting as brokers and spokesmen for the rest of the group. For this reason, their actions are particularly visible to us and can offer a valuable indication about the behaviors of the whole group they represented. This is not equal to saying that these elites were the only agents in the process, or that they could take whichever course they pleased. They were instead tightly constrained in their action by customary expectations, by power balances vis-à-vis their peers, and by the limits of what their dependents were willing to tolerate before walking away to join another group. These elites are the visible manifestation of a vertically integrated social entity composed of a variety of different elements.

For centuries, the central Mediterranean had been home to myriad lineages of this kind, interacting, moving, and competing in very different ways, when a new development occurred. Between the ninth and the sixth century BCE, neighboring elites came together to form larger state communities, which almost always took on an urban form. The lineages themselves were not dissolved in the new entity, however, but simply ceded some of their power to the state in some specific public contexts. They were willing to do so because cities were becoming rapidly the new tools that facilitated coordinated action as well as political and commercial long-distance

contacts. But originally cities were simply truce spaces where elites would suspend mutual hostility and engage in communal defense. They also became convenient vehicles and forms of self-representation for aristocrats who were more than ever busy trying to expand their influence and prestige. And, as a matter of fact, noble lineages frequently switched to a different city or created strong ties of marriage and adoption with lineages of other cities, influenced their political scene, staged coups, and even waged private wars. The sphere of interaction of these elites and that of states continued to have autonomous, if intersected, lives as long as the cities themselves lasted, and they were never completely merged or confused. Depending on the context and on the issue, elites could opt to take action at either of these two levels to achieve their specific ends, and loyalty to their lineages typically came well ahead of their sense of state.

Ethnic clusters also tended to become more visible and relevant in the early first millennium BCE, sometimes focusing upon large extra-urban sanctuaries where people from different communities converged. While this dimension indisputably played an important role, reinforced by commonalities in areas such as language and ritual, they always remained only one of the many possible identities that could be donned in any given circumstance. Whenever ethnic boundaries coincided roughly with factions that agreed on the same course of action, common traits could be invoked and put to use in providing cohesion. But, contrary to some modern expectations, ethnic affinities and differences would not automatically override any other consideration, as is clearly shown by the ease with which such identifications could be changed in alliances and resettlements. Just like civic or religious ones, ethnic identities were like banners that could be picked up and waved to call one's faction to the rally, whenever they happened to suit the contingent power network configuration. The ethnic group that was most frequently endowed with an active role in ancient and modern narratives was of course the Roman one, and indeed the conquest has almost invariably been seen as the triumph of a superior ethnic group over all the others. Romanness, however, was a very blurred and ill-defined identity from the start, always conceived as a mixture of different elements. Over time, with the growth of the conquest, it increasingly became a very pliable and expanding political identity, embraced by quantities of other Italians to further their ambition and power.

In the broader geographical context of the Mediterranean, the emergence of territorial states from the fourth century BCE onward is a phenomenon of great significance to understanding what happened around the same time in central and southern Italy. With remarkable synchronism,

within the same couple of generations, several large cities that had apparently been more or less content with the size of the territories they directly controlled for some four hundred years began expanding on a radically different scale than ever before. For the first time in this part of the world, they started incorporating other major cities. The cases of Syracuse, Carthage, and Rome are the more blatant and historically relevant ones, but there is evidence to suggest that they were not the only polities in the region to move in the same expansive direction. If one adds to that the rise of Macedonia and other states to the east, there is every indication that the whole system had suddenly become ripe for much larger political entities to come into being and expand quickly. Naturally, these expansionist bids were in competition and this drove a rapid escalation of the process. The progress of each competitor must have been closely monitored by the others. Such parallel developments across several discrete foci of territorial expansion and in a vast geographic context can only be explained by the effects of global mechanisms, rather than local factors in Rome or anywhere else. Mediterranean-wide processes had to be at work to make all these different expansions possible and viable. A window of opportunity was thrown open, and more than one potential player tried to take advantage of it and get ahead of the rivals. Emphasizing the competition between parallel expansionist projects in the fourth- and third-century Mediterranean has many far-reaching implications, which have been insufficiently explored in the past. It forces us to look for causal factors that affected the whole region and stimulated expansion, rather than focusing on what was happening in each individual polity.

When seen in a global perspective, the synchronism of Roman and other empire-building attempts also highlights the discontinuity that marked it with what had happened previously. Before the fourth century BCE, there had been some territorial gains, but only of very modest entities. Rome had often been engaged in wars, but it had at most accomplished the elimination of independent secondary centers like Crustumerium or temporarily wrested others from neighboring cities, like Fidenae from Veii. No other state in the region accomplished much more than this, and no top-tier urban center anywhere was destroyed or permanently subjugated. Some minor outposts were created in strategic points of the territory, like Ostia at the mouth of the river, but they did not acquire the status of full cities. Colonies were of course founded by Greek cities, but they did not become part of the mother city's state. Nothing happened that was structurally comparable to later developments. Of course, elite culture had always been very militaristic throughout the region, but it had found its primary area

of expression in seasonal raids that did not significantly alter the political map. Warrior ideology continued to be a factor everywhere in the period of the conquest; no intrinsic Roman trait, however, can explain why the scope and purpose of their military action changed so dramatically from a certain point onward, in synchrony with similar developments in competing imperialist states.

Focusing on the coexistence of a number of fast-growing expansionist ventures in the region also helps us understand the overall historical conjuncture, and consequently appreciate the limited range of options that remained open for those states that were not expanding. For them, small-scale neutrality and independence must have been increasingly unrealistic to preserve or, even worse, regain. In the event, it became clear to the elites involved that their only viable choice was to lend their support to whoever offered the better terms, unless they wanted to start an empire of their own. And indeed we see that these states began negotiating the terms of their incorporation, especially in central Italy, where they were tightly clustered together. Their decisions and actions and choices must be investigated and decoded, too, because they played a fundamental role in shaping the overall outcome. If the goal is to explain convincingly the unification of Italy, attention needs to be paid to all those factors that affected not only Rome but also the majority of the other actors at play, and that tilted the scales globally in favor of integration. Of course it is not a question of identifying an absolute prime mover but rather of retracing a tangle of causal threads enmeshed in complex ways. What happened in the central Mediterranean from the fourth century BCE onward is a multifaceted phenomenon that tied together disparate contexts and regions.

A wide range of interrelated processes characterized the entire region at the time when several imperialist bids got in motion. The order in which they are discussed here is less important than the way in which they had an influence on each other, and on the global political revolution of this period. It is noteworthy that recent archeological finds have made a significant contribution to the reconstruction of the material preconditions to the unification attempts. For instance, existing cities witnessed a rapid increase of new construction and expansion. This seems to reflect a new aristocratic interest for what happened in administrative centers. Elites redirected vast resources from private consumption to public munificence, especially for the construction of temples and city walls. At the same time, rich burials and luxurious residences were still being created, but they now clustered much more tightly in and around the booming cities. The evidence from shipwrecks and pottery distribution indicates that commerce was picking

up. Other long-distance interactions, in the sphere of diplomacy and interstate politics, were also increasing considerably. More than ever before, all this was turning cities into crucial arenas for elites seeking political and economic advancement. Local craft productions also intensified, especially in urban areas, stimulated by an increased demand and by a convergence in elite fashions. Artistic and literary tastes originating in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean became common throughout the region, providing a common ground for aristocrats from different backgrounds. It is arguable, however, that these new trends did not affect the whole social spectrum, nor did they radically change the traditional mentality.² As all these forms of interactions intensified, it became clear at least to some elites throughout the region that new opportunities to advance their lineages had become available to those among them that would participate in influential, expanding states. Such a realization naturally pushed many aristocrats to gravitate toward cities and even to found new ones, so that they would not be left out of the new Mediterranean-wide political game.

The increased importance of the urban network was accompanied by a development of interconnected human landscapes, where the surplus that fueled the cities was being produced. With remarkable synchronism, an unprecedented number of isolated farms made their appearance in the archeological record documented by surveys. At the same time, earlier fortified villages were progressively, but never completely, abandoned. Such a widespread diffusion of scattered small-scale rural residences created a much greater political need for their protection from the raiding warfare that had been endemic for ages between neighboring states, if the newly emerged human landscape was to have any stability and viability. The problem was made worse by the increased frequency, gravity, and geographic range of looting raids by less sedentary and pastoral peoples from the Apennine highlands and from the Po Plain. These expeditions impacted farms, as well as secondary centers and the occasional city, more than ever before. The issue was further compounded by the spread of arboricultural-based crops, like olives and wine grapes, which, once destroyed, took many years to regrow. In a connected social development, at least in some areas, landed elites were finding that their hegemonic role within their states and vis-à-vis their traditional subordinates was under challenge, in the face of the social changes that were affecting rural landscapes, and which may have been stirring up unrest among their lower classes. These troubling circumstances were aggravated by the expanding weight that traders, craftsmen, and other

² Full argument in Terrenato 1998a; Terrenato 2001c; Torelli 2012.

nonfood-producing specialists were acquiring, especially in the urban context. These new social agents often clamored for a larger share of the political power. A broader interstate alliance dominated by landed elites was an obvious response to these problems: joining forces across different cities, these groups could achieve a stabilization (when not a crystallization) of the existing social hierarchy, mitigating the risk of upheavals and regime changes, while at the same time eliminating the scourge of mutual raiding. All these processes do not appear to be specific in any one area – central Italy, Sicily, or any other. They instead characterized most parts of the central Mediterranean region in the fourth and third centuries BCE. They cannot be interpreted as a consequence of any one conquest or political development since their distribution does not correlate with those transformations. Rather the conjuncture of so many significant new factors arguably created the preconditions and the need for a new political order that found its way paved by them. In this way, the central Mediterranean turned into a very different kind of socioeconomic habitat, so to speak, one that could not only support but actually required much larger organisms than ever before. The empire centered on Rome emerged as the political life form that was better adapted to this new environment.

A different historical phase opened up a broad field of action for those who were poised to reap the advantages of a stronger integration across wider geographic spaces. Many of the most active agents in this brave new world were landed elites of the same kind as (or occasionally actual descendants of) those who had put cities together in the first place. Territorially expanding empires, just like cities had half a millennium before, could function as a new vehicle for traditional actors who strove to increase their status, as well as the range of their influence, on an unprecedented scale. Aristocratic networks now sprawled out well beyond their traditional scope, easily spanning civic, ethnic, and regional boundaries, and at the same time became more intense and more politically significant. Large and complex factional groups emerged, and their members saw clearly the potential benefit of assuming a prominent role in the booming political entity. Jockeying for position, they competed to be the ones to reap the first fruits produced by the new historical conditions. On a smaller scale but with similar tools, they sought political gain in Rome, by employing the experience they achieved when competing for leadership in their local states. Ambitious aristocrats, at this point, set their sights much higher, aiming at an overarching structure that would link together all the existing urban states in central and southern Italy and, where necessary, create new ones. A brutal competition arose among elite networks and factions

to collect the enormous benefits of such an epoch-making historical transition. Italian elites in central Italy, Roman and non-Roman alike, engaged in elaborate factional interplay to steer the growing imperial machinery in directions that were favorable to them. Thanks to a system of elective, yearly commands, they were able to seize temporary control of the state and the army and direct it toward endeavors that were relevant to their factional priorities. In this way, they acquired influence, patronage, and wealth, which in turn allowed them to compete more effectively for additional turns in office. In this manner, these networks extended and intensified across central and southern Italy, never fully merging together into a homogeneous citizen empire but rather weaving and entangling their projects together into that tight ravel we call the Roman state.

At a higher, regional scale, the expansionist networks centering on Rome were in competition with other similar movements originating elsewhere. There were alternate visions of how to structure a new political entity that were propounded by other expanding states and by the factions that were based there. It is a central argument of this book that, in order to succeed, these competing projects needed to persuade as many aristocrats as possible to join their ranks. In this sense, it is not far-fetched to describe these expansionist attempts as bids that vied for the attention and support of landed elites across the entire geographic and ethnic context. Since, as was argued before, the global conditions had ripened for the emergence of a territorial empire that could ensure social stability, safety from raids, and improved integration, several big players started making offers, which all contained a distinctive blend of guarantees, promises, boasts, and threats. The factional leaders within each state were all involved in negotiating, pleading, bullying, and scaring their way to the head of a successful bandwagon. They all used militaristic, expansionist states as their vehicles, but they also took full advantage of the networks of patronage, friendship, and dependence that they had assembled for centuries. Unrestrained violence and imposition by force, on the other hand, were used sparingly, exclusively in exceptional circumstances, or else the other Italians could be alienated and likely be more receptive to a competing bid.

If there was a unifying vision that the myriad expansionist moves made by Roman generals had in common, it was the creation of a higher level of governance, located above that of the individual cities, without replacing or excessively disrupting it. In a scaled-up analogy with what had happened when cities were first created, such an overarching structure was meant to require the least possible loss of traditional power for its participating entities. Authority and jurisdiction were transferred to the topmost political

level only for matters that inherently transcended the range of action of the individual component units. A structure of this kind was definitely not the product of the kind heart of its proponents. The Roman Empire, unlike the British one according to Seeley, was not “conquered ... in a fit of absence of mind.”³ Nor did it have a civilizing mission of peace and prosperity. Simply put, its generals deployed as much oppression and violence as was advantageous and feasible for them to do, and not more. Using all the tools at their disposal, they tried to finesse the integration of many power systems in a way that would make the expansionist bid acceptable to the largest possible elite constituency. Difficult as it might be for us, who live in a world of nation-states, we must try to imagine a cultural horizon in which elites primarily measured success in terms of the advancement of their own lineage, much more than that of the city or the empire they belonged to. As is demonstrated by the ease with which sides could be switched or specific empires could be joined and abandoned according to private convenience, there was a transactional approach of elites toward these overarching political entities, despite any proclamations of patriotism. No triumph of Rome (or of any other empire) would mean much to its ruling class, if it determined a diminution of their power and status. It must always be recalled that, behind the political abstractions that are so convenient for us to use, there were real people trying to figure out what their next move would be within the constraints of their historical horizon and their mentality. The generals and statesmen that put the empire together were, for the most part, men past their first youth; they had long been embedded within their kin group, which represented their main cultural and affective focus. Faced with unprecedented global challenges and opportunities, they tried to steer a course that would best serve the interests of the lineage for which they were immediately responsible. Whenever they managed to reach positions that involved the representation of political entities, such as cities or states, their actions were dictated by the unquestioned loyalty they owed to their elite group and, more generally, constrained by their traditional mentality and upbringing.

The actual mechanics of the expansion of Rome in central and southern Italy can be conceptualized in a different way, once a new vision of the general nature of the process is put in place. In lieu of the traditional list of victorious campaigns and colonial foundations, the focus can be fruitfully shifted to the macroscopic question of how it could happen that a polity like Rome became the center of such a vast territorial empire. All other

³ Woolf 2016.

considerations aside, it just appears demographically implausible that a single city-based state, even if slightly bigger than average, could really sustain the enormous manpower drain that would have been required to conquer and control the entire peninsula through armed force, while at the same time populating dozens of new urban sites, as many traditional reconstructions envision. And indeed little in the historical and archaeological record supports a model of this kind, which was instead extrapolated from a few uncharacteristic instances. Many Italian polities entered the Roman Empire with little or no recorded clashes and virtually all of them faithfully remained in the alliance in the absence of direct military control, even when the fortunes of Rome were teetering. The terms of the treaties between Rome and each incorporated polity, accordingly, tended to be respectful of local autonomy and to impose only very specific provisions. Taken as a whole, these negotiations produced a grand bargain that brought together elites from different cities and ethnic groups into a new stable polity. Their alliance left their local paramountcy intact (when not firmed up and augmented) and presented them with unprecedented opportunities on the global Mediterranean stage. Building on centuries of such contacts, and of interstate wheeling and dealing, many aristocrats decided to create a new entity that would give them a much stronger and more stable position within their society as well as globally. These elites were trying to gain or maintain the upper hand in their local communities, while at the same time participating in the top-tier interactions that were developing in Rome. To this end, larger elite networks linking together many lineages in fluid factional networks were created and reinforced; the resulting process was far from peaceful.

The hypothesis advanced here, that unification can be explained as an elite response to the changed conditions and challenges of the time, does not imply that no one resisted it. Pointing out the benefits that aristocrats belonging to successful networks could reap is not equal to saying that they all found their lot improved in an idyllic win-win scenario. The conquest of Italy, like all great historical transformations, had its losers, who suffered terrible privations of life and property. The real question, however, is to determine who they were, rather than assuming that it was all those who were not Roman. In fact, there was a wide spectrum of them. First and foremost, there were those aristocrats who were defeated simply because they belonged to a losing faction, either in Rome or elsewhere. By definition, factions always oppose other factions not over political or philosophical ideas – like parties do – but simply over predominance on each other. While many elites had similar political ideals and goals, they fought each

other bitterly over who was going to benefit the most from the transformation. Patronage, influence, and wealth were at stake in unprecedented amounts. In the event, some of the factions that used Rome as their vehicle tended to prevail, for reasons discussed below. Those who succumbed, in Rome or elsewhere, like Manlius Capitolinus or Vitruvius Vaccus, suffered very harsh consequences.⁴ Additionally, there were groups that simply did not want the kind of unification that ultimately prevailed, for instance because it put an end to their raiding activities. Or in any case, they would have preferred different arrangements, like an even looser alliance or a federal capital elsewhere. Many in the uplands of the Apennines seem to have had agendas along these lines and, consequently, actively resisted the new ideas that were emanating from the coastal cities. Then of course there were competing imperialist bids, or rather those factional networks that had attached themselves to another expanding polity. Many Tarentine elites, as an example, clearly envisioned an integration that would be more tightly linked to what was happening in mainland Greece. Last but not least, some emergent socioeconomic groups, like the former serfs who had seized power in Arezzo, were pushing hard for a political system that was not so completely slanted toward the landed aristocracy. Everywhere in Italy, those who promoted social reform and greater vertical mobility mounted a strong opposition to the new order being imposed, but they were unsuccessful. Something similar happened in those polities that had more democratic constitutions and a tradition of broader power-sharing with the artisanal and commercial classes. Many of these actors did not benefit from the unification of Italy brought about by the landed aristocrats. Indeed, for them, the grand bargain meant that their adversaries had formed a coalition that, in the medium term, was impossible to break. For centuries afterwards, they were repressed by a system that was heavily tilted in favor of those who controlled land resources and consequently had vast numbers of clients.

It cannot be repeated enough times that the vision presented here is not an attempt to sanitize the Roman conquest of Italy, denying that there were losers. It does not assert that violence had no part to play in the process. Blood was shed in massive quantities, people were enslaved and raped, houses were burnt down, and property was seized. What is argued, however, is that the negative consequences disproportionately affected those who had opposed the winning integration bid. As we have seen, these were a heterogeneous collection of social and factional groups that cut across

⁴ Terrenato 2014; Torelli 2017; Meunier 2019.

ethnic and political boundaries, just like the winners did. Their demise and downsizing had the net effect of consolidating the power of the victorious factions, since it created polities in which the leaders had a significant and durable stake in the long-term success of the expansion process. The negotiation between landed elites tended to exclude large swaths of other Italians from access to power. Inasmuch as the expansion was a reactionary response to the social change that was mounting, it frustrated the legitimate political ambitions of emerging social actors, like craftsmen, traders, professionals, and landless rich in the cities, and free farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs in the countryside. This was just as true in Rome itself as anywhere else. At a broader scale, the conquest entailed the permanent submission of Apennine raiding pastoralists to coastal sedentary farmers. Even among those who did not lose their life in the violence, there was no shortage of people who lost out in the process, including many Romans. Despite all the violence, the question remains, however, whether brute force was the primary ingredient that expanded Rome's control and, above all, maintained it. It seems undeniable that without an element of broad negotiated consensus at the elite level, no amount of threat would have kept Italians together.

In light of the considerations expressed above, it should be clear that the argument developed in this book does not attempt to make the Roman conquest of Italy more palatable to our sensibilities by emphasizing negotiation and consensus. Needless to say, no moral judgment of events so distant in time from us has any durable meaning. The central point here is not to minimize the gravity of the losses but rather to redefine who were the actual winners and losers. This book proposes to replace the traditional dichotomy opposing Romans to other Italians with the alternative concept of a grand bargain between specific urban elite lineages across ethnic lines at the expense of other aristocrats, pastoralists, and rising social actors, both in Rome itself and in other states. When one looks at who were the beneficiaries of the new order once the dust settled in Italy, say in the second century BCE, one finds a mixed bag of landed lineages hailing from all over the peninsula, with the very gradual addition of enterprising new economic actors.

There were undoubtedly many different scenarios under which individual communities joined the alliance. Some recurring patterns, however, can be detected and account for a sizable part of the variability. In many cases, local dominant elites stipulated an alliance with Roman leaders on specific terms, easily overcoming any opposition at home or in Rome. In others, there was a strong faction that opposed any attempt of integration. This may have been because they preferred a different bandwagon or, quite

simply, wanted to be the ones to govern the transition. When this happened, battles with the army assembled by a Roman general could break out. In these frequent situations, it would not have been hard for the supporters of that specific Roman action not to take part in any active resistance, to drag their feet in battle, or even to open the city gates. This would have left the opposite faction alone to fight it out with the army of the Roman commander and his allies. The frequent occurrence in ancient narratives of intrigues, betrayals, and defections that cause battlefield disasters and the fall of sieged cities seem to imply the existence of intense back-channel negotiations and should not be dismissed as romantic historical color. Military conflict could also take ritualized forms, exemplified by the single combat of chiefs and generals, or by champions' fights, immolations, and similar highly formalized types of combat behavior. It is possible that the ritualistic component present in the battlefield behaviors of many premodern warrior societies may have been underestimated in the case of the Roman expansion. Thus only some of the clashes would have reflected real fundamental oppositions, while others would have facilitated the transition to different political arrangements while saving the militaristic face of the elites involved. In another possible scenario, cities simply placed themselves at the mercy or in the trust of Rome. This was usually a response to threats from a larger external force or from a competing unification project. Those cities probably opted for the alliance centered on Rome as the lesser evil and relied on the constraints that tradition and convenience placed on how they would be treated. Rome could also be called in to help with local social unrest, clearly revealing its role as global guardian of the aristocratic order across central and southern Italy.

The range of incorporation scenarios proposed in this book posits the existence of close and reliable ties between landed elites across the whole geographic context. The negotiations that led to the unification were made possible by an implicit trust that covered certain codes of behavior between aristocrats. Most illustrative of this crucial element are those cases in which a Roman general showed up in support of specific local lineages. These could be part of an explicit pro-integration faction, which may well have been the minority locally, or they could be groups that had been expelled from the city or otherwise struggling politically. In all these situations, an appeal to their friends in Rome represented a golden opportunity for aristocrats to come to (or remain in) power with a decisive move that crushed their local opponents for good. These maneuvers may appear to modern nationalist historians as betrayals of civic loyalty and independence, but, seen through the eyes of traditional aristocrats, they were instead

a perfectly legitimate means to achieve the primary goal of advancing one's lineage. The sacrifice of some (or even all) of the local state's freedom was more than repaid, in this logic, by its liberation from hostile and inappropriate influences. In some exceptional instances, the very status and even the physical location of the city could become part of the discussion. Urban sites could be relocated to a more accessible position, their constitution changed, their status changed to *ex novo*, or even, in the famous early (and unique) case of Veii, destroyed and their population lumped with that of Rome. The elimination of Veii, the foundation of Cosa and Paestum, and the alliance with Arezzo or Camerino are radically different processes in their material form, but, seen in another perspective, they all produce comparable outcomes: urban communities in the patronage of the lineage that brokered the annexation and, locally, firmly in the hands of existing landed aristocrats. The latter saw membership in the Roman alliance with favor and had powerful links with other elites in the administrative and political center, as well as in the rest of the alliance.

Perhaps the most important element in the present interpretation is that it allows for a much wider range of motion for the agency of Italian communities and their elites in particular. Having recentered our explanatory framework on negotiation instead of submission, the need remains to discuss the terms of the agreements that tied Roman Italy together. It is here that the secret of the success and duration of the unification may ultimately reside. Some fundamental questions about the nature of the empire that coalesced around Rome in the fourth and third centuries BCE still require an answer. Why did central and southern Italians come to terms, in one way or another, with the new political entity? Above all, why did they stand by it for so many centuries and in the face of difficult challenges? To answer these questions, it is useful to consider the landscapes of power in the affected regions before and after the conquest. If there was indeed a grand bargain, what happened in its aftermath should illustrate what manner of compromise had been reached between elites. In other words, we can try to infer the terms of a negotiation that is almost completely lost to us on the basis of the realities it produced. There is no doubt that for well-connected elites integration within a new entity centered on Rome would offer all the advantages that came with membership in a powerful territorial empire on the Mediterranean scene. Ambitious elites needed institutional vehicles to further themselves, and in the course of the fourth century BCE it became quite clear that those who were left out from one of the expanding new states would have only a limited chance of benefiting from participation in the global power game. Several competing

imperialist bid attempts were in quick motion, and elites that had not yet joined one of them soon realized that their realistic options were rapidly shrinking. One was to cast their lot with the empire that offered the most acceptable deal (and where they already had connections). The only alternative was to start their own bid, but the odds of accomplishing this soon became very steep and the dangers terrible. Staying small and independent was not in the cards any longer, and most aristocrats saw that clearly. Another important factor at play was the need for security, both internal and external. Only a strong alliance of landed elites could at the same time protect states from hostile takeovers, local aristocratic power from social unrest, scattered rural settlements from raids, and travel and trade from pirates and brigands. So many birds could be killed with just the right stone. The various networks attempting to make this colossal new integration project happen were harshly competing with each other to carve out the big slice of power, patronage, and wealth that was the reward of those who promoted successful individual expansionist moves. The agglomeration of elite networks centering on Rome emerged as the most effective at this effort, for reasons that need to be investigated carefully.

The qualifying elements of the successful bid were many, and although they obviously were not all explicitly spelled out in a document, they would have been easy for Italians to infer from the observation of what happened to other communities and elites once they had joined. First and foremost, well-connected allied aristocrats were offered a chance to participate in the direction and the rewards of expansion. The stake they could aspire to was proportional to the size and influence that each of them could command, and it grew over time, so that early takers were rewarded with remarkable advantages. Non-Roman elites could thus acquire a voice in the political game that directed the diplomatic and strategic decisions of the whole alliance. This usually, but not always, involved moving at least some of their members to Rome with the help of local friends and acquiring Roman citizenship. In this way, they entered the political fray and, if successful, would gain access to new Mediterranean-wide opportunities. At home, in the meantime, the social position of these elites would be guaranteed against social upheaval and excessive factional strife thanks to the political stability that came from the consociation of elite interests throughout the expanding empire. Consequently, the archeological and historical evidence showing that many Italian elites survived and thrived within the Roman alliance has a decisive importance for the interpretation propounded here. Relevant indicators in this sense can be found in disparate documentary series. One is the well-known significant presence of families of non-Roman origin

among the generals and the senators in Rome, attesting to the permeability of the federal political system and to the chances that were offered to well-connected outsiders. Another very important element is the fact that in most of central and southern Italy local lineages survived and typically remained preeminent within their communities. This is attested by inscriptions and other textual material, especially in those areas, like Etruscan-speaking ones, that are blessed with a rich epigraphic record. Much more widespread and statistically significant is the persistence of traditional elite burial customs. Those are attested in large numbers at graveyards throughout the peninsula and must indicate that locals were still able to afford lavish family tombs, even in polities that had in theory been disrupted by a violent conquest. Taken together, all these indicators of continuity strongly suggest that those non-Roman lineages that made the right choices at the right time fared very well, both at home and in the capital. Once again, it would be naïve and idealistic to credit these policies to the benevolence, *laissez-faire* attitude, or absent-mindedness of the Romans. This mechanism was instead a defining component of the grand bargain, and one that arguably determined the ultimate success of the Roman bid, because it made Roman expansion tolerable, when not desirable, for a critical mass of Italian elites.

The price to pay for the new opportunities that the empire afforded was considerable but, for many, not unbearable. Incorporated communities could retain their local power networks and often their administrative structure. Local traditions and customs were not altered and no interaction with global economic systems was imposed from above. Customary social obligations linking elites and commoners were left in place and indeed restored and reinforced whenever necessary. Allies had to relinquish their sovereignty to the senate, when it came to foreign and global diplomatic affairs, and military leadership to the magistrates elected in Rome. However, they were not precluded from participation in either. They had to contribute sizable contingents to the federal army, but they fought separately under their own officers and were entitled to a share of the booty. Taxation and tribute were collected by Rome, so that, with the addition of loot and elite expenditure, colossal resources were drained toward the capital from all parts of the peninsula. Just as in the case of diplomacy and war, however, well-connected Italian elites had a say in how this wealth would be allocated. As premodern empires went, these were moderate requests for the landed aristocrats who were the privileged partners of the alliance. Things were much harsher for those actors, both elite and nonelite, who had not been part of the factional networks that put the alliance together. Another important feature of the new political entity

was its approach to the infrastructure that could facilitate exchange and integration. Here a fine line seems to have been walked between allowing communities to run their internal affairs and impacting the interactions between them. The early imperial action focused primarily on regulation of the interstices between preexisting polities, where no established practices would be disrupted. For instance, a uniform language for empire-wide official business was introduced, but no attempt was made at pushing it as a local spoken language. A legal code was progressively introduced, but it primarily applied to those disputes that could not be resolved locally. Over time, the same happened for measures, coinage, and some craft and trading standards. Travel cost was reduced by curbing piracy and brigandage, but police interventions inside cities were limited to the rare cases of social unrest that could not be dealt with locally. It is worth underscoring again that there were indeed momentous changes, but they disproportionately affected the no man's land that existed between the jurisdictions of lineages and cities. The central power impacted and regulated the spaces between the communities in the alliance much more tightly than the communities themselves.

The spread of Roman citizenship is another process that was essential to the Italy-wide negotiation. It was used as a bargaining tool by Roman leaders, and it gave them much-needed flexibility in compensating and rewarding specific communities, groups, and even individual families and persons. By creating a whole other layer of political rights above those granted by each city, the new form of citizenship was an ideal device to cement together interstate and interethnic alliances. It progressively expanded the reach of central regulation, making the new citizens subject to Roman law, taxation, and draft, while at the same time providing enfranchised local elites with a real opportunity to influence the substance of that same regulation. The process continued into the second and early first centuries BCE, beyond the chronological scope of this book. It notoriously ended with a conflict, the Social War, that opposed many Italians, especially from the uplands, to the central power. In its aftermath, citizenship was extended to all the inhabitants of the peninsula. While this is obviously not the place to deal with this complex historical transition in any detail, in the perspective of this book it can be observed that most of the rebels in the Social War did not aim at breaking the alliance apart but rather at renegotiating the terms of their incorporation, primarily with respect to citizenship rights.⁵ In the event, the Roman army prevailed

⁵ Mouritsen 1998; Kendall 2013; Dart 2015; Santangelo 2018.

militarily, but the Italians obtained the main contractual concession that they were interested in wresting.

At the cultural level, too, there was a combination of integration and traditionalism. Elites were drawn closer together in their expensive tastes, but they went on performing their traditional roles in their communities of origin. A common link was forged when it came to the kind of decorated terracottas that should be nailed to their temples or the kind of jewelry to wear. Their houses also began to resemble each other more. Many of the elites interacted and influenced each other in Rome, resulting in a further concentration of wealth there, in addition to what was acquired by the state in the form of loot, tax, and tribute. Equally large sums, however, were being spent on projects that were beyond the reach of individual communities, such as roads, bridges, or large-scale land reclamation efforts. Seen in this light, the Roman Empire was in many ways a framework that allowed units to be aggregated, stacked, and articulated in a certain way, allowing new and improved signals to circulate around the network. Those in charge were not so restrained out of their generosity but because they could not and should not have done more. The political and economic resources of the alliance would not have been sufficient to effect more radical changes, and, most importantly, they would have made the process unacceptable to most Italian elites. This would have had the effect of tearing apart the federation before it could be consolidated.

As far as we can reconstruct it, the basic nature of the grand bargain that brought central and southern Italy together was aimed at creating consensus among friendly elites. There was of course wide variability in the specific terms that were agreed upon in each case. But as a whole this approach resulted in an exceptionally resilient imperial formation, based on deals struck among key elite players in each polity. The longevity and stability of Roman Italy provide the clearest proof that strong aristocratic solidarity underpinned the alliance in a fundamental way. The incorporated communities never tried seriously to break the empire apart or to secede from it, but only renegotiated the bargain from time to time, as could be expected. Military threat did not keep Italy together, as is demonstrated by what happened at the moment when the alliance was most dangerously tested, during the Hannibalic invasion of Italy.⁶ In that extreme crisis, when Roman armed forces were all but annihilated, the alliance could not be pried apart by force. There were indeed pro-Carthaginian factions in many cities (as well as many Roman allies who dragged their feet), but overall they remained

⁶ MacDonald 2015.

in a minority position.⁷ Most polities, especially in central Italy, stayed on Rome's side despite the imminent threat posed by Hannibal's army at their gates, and they often suffered harsh consequences as a result of their choice. There is no other plausible explanation for this remarkable behavior than to conclude that Italian elites, at a time when it was entirely within their power to dissolve the Roman Empire, decided instead to keep it alive. The deal they had negotiated with the Romans, even at a time when its survival was in doubt, was still preferable to anything that Hannibal could offer. In a word, Rome could be defeated, but it could not be easily outbid, at least in Italy.

It is impossible to know what terms Carthage or Syracuse offered to their prospective allies, except in the case of Hannibal and Capua.⁸ But there is indirect evidence to suggest that the territorial aggregations that they were both trying to put together did not provide enough chances for the newcomers to access federal power and contained an element of ethnic and cultural exclusion, or at least of preoccupation. The constitution of Syracuse, like that of many other Greek cities, emphasized citizenship based on descent and requiring residence in the capital. Indeed known cases of foreigners (especially non-Greeks) entering the political scene there are exceedingly rare. Carthage seems to have had a comparable attitude toward ambitious outsiders. Such lack of permeability would have been an obvious deal-breaker for elites that were keen to be part of the imperial decision-making process. Explaining why these expanding powers did not try to imitate Rome's openness is not easy. They may well have had as cultural points of departure traditional mentalities that were not easily convertible to the ideology of inclusive territorial empires. It must be remembered that imperialist bids were not produced by cold, functional, optimizing calculations that had the benefit of our hindsight. Instead they were the result of slow, progressive modifications and refunctionalizations of traditional mindsets, which could not be unceremoniously jettisoned and replaced with more convenient ones.

In contrast with its competitors, prequest Rome was a peculiarly well-suited and well-located city to serve as the focus of a broad and heterogeneous political aggregation. Its identity happened to be conveniently hazy in terms of ethnic and cultural origins. Its foundation narratives spoke of a ragtag group of refugees and outlaws as its founding fathers, and they celebrated the achievements of foreign kings and immigrant aristocracy. Rome's perceived ethnicity could more easily be plied and reshaped to serve

⁷ Fronda 2010.

⁸ Fronda 2007.

the purposes of inclusion, and, in truth, the city straddled a major linguistic boundary between Indo-European and non-Indo-European speakers. Defined in turn as Latin, Etruscan, Sabine, Trojan, and even Greek in the ancient discourse, from its very beginnings Rome was notorious for its liberality in granting citizenship and privileges to outsiders. In short, it started the expansion process already equipped with a vaguely defined cultural heritage and with a propensity for elite permeability. These traits turned out to be well suited to the ideological needs of the period of the conquest. They could easily be invoked to underpin the new philosophy of inclusiveness and recombination that was the defining trait of the unification project. At the sociopolitical level, Rome was firmly in the hands of landed elites of a very similar kind to those ruling most other urban communities in the region. Geographically, it was at the center of one of the largest and densest clusters of cities in the entire Mediterranean. Finally, it was a commercial and productive hub, with intense and well-established long-distance contacts and interactions, but had not been impacted by the democratic drifts that had taken place in many primarily commercial states.

Rome's long-standing reputation as a place where elite foreigners could quickly become political big shots made it an ideal candidate to become the capital of a multicultural empire. As a consequence, however, the city ceased to be a city-based polity in its own right, a unique fate in the region. To an extent, it was expropriated from its original community and morphed instead into a global capital, with a deluge of new powerful arrivals, as well as voting citizens scattered throughout the empire. In this way, it naturally became the central arena where the most disparate elites converged to negotiate, to resolve their conflicts, and to vie for power and prestige. In this process, old Roman aristocratic groups obviously had an important advantage in that the game was played on their home turf, where they enjoyed valuable political and religious privileges. Unlike all the other elites, however, they had to relinquish their local power base and constituency and had no place anymore where they were the large native fish in a small pond. Was Rome a small state that spread its power in all directions, or was Rome more like a central tool used by a wide variety of Italian elites to accomplish their purposes, and which in the process lost its original identity to a much greater degree than any other polity? Did Rome conquer Italy or did Italy overcome Rome? Is this what Francis Bacon meant when he claimed, "it was not the Romans that spread upon the world, but it was the world that spread upon the Romans"?⁹

⁹ See p. 14.

The geographical pattern of the expansion itself appears highly significant. The conquest followed a path of least resistance and opportunity, rather than one of overall grand military strategy. It went first to powerful peer urban states, which were the ones that had the most resources, and only later to the lesser states and to looser polities of the Apennine highlands and the Po Plain, with whom instead the most wars were fought. Once the unification of the contiguous urbanized areas of western central Italy was completed, further expansion had to move much less organically, often leaving behind large regions that were geographically much closer but structurally harder to incorporate. Among these were those rare areas that eventually had to be dealt with violently, especially those characterized by mountainous, broken terrain, such as Samnium and Liguria. These much less digestible geographical pieces were mouthfuls barely of a size that could be slowly swallowed without tearing the whole organism apart. In terms of population, the majority of central and southern Italy was compatible, if diverse, with the project. It was only a minority of upland regions and groups that, for a variety of reasons, were much less amenable to incorporation. Indeed it could well be argued that an important element that qualified Rome's bid was precisely the promise that it would undertake a sustained and energetic action in these difficult areas so that they would cease being a source of raids and instability.

One of the more fundamental structural changes that the unification brought was that the urban coastal communities permanently joined forces under Rome to deal once and for all with the nonurban, unruly peoples of the highlands and the Po Plain. Unification was a prerequisite for this epoch-making endeavor, as no individual polity, by itself, would have had the necessary resources to undertake it. Even in the troublesome areas, the alliance always tried its default approach, which involved finding suitable elite partners for negotiation. Only when a critical mass could not be put together through consensus, because the terms of the integration would be unacceptable for the highlanders, violence was deployed, primarily to contain these problematic peoples. Even in these difficult cases, the administrative approach was limited to creating something like enclaves within the integrated alliance, with no sustained attempt at reorganizing their internal power structure. This does not detract from the fact that some of these highland groups were among the more negatively affected by the conquest. Over time, however, a greater effort was deployed in these areas, mainly directed at reformatting communities to make them more stable and compatible. This was achieved by supporting friendly local aristocrats, by founding colonies, and by reorganizing land tenure patterns. Exceptionally, irreducible groups were forcibly relocated.

In the vast majority of Italian communities, however, strong exertions on the part of the central government were not necessary, neither during nor in the aftermath of the incorporation. They would in any case have been impossible to carry out in more than a few cases. No major effort to turn things around was required, and in fact it was precisely the elites who had entered into the alliance that demanded that things be kept stable within their communities. Those actors who were on the losing side in factional or social terms found the range of their political action to be severely curtailed, primarily by the firm grip of local elites with powerful friends in Rome. A consequence of the social and political continuity that characterized the post-conquest period in most urban communities is that traditional mentalities continued largely undisturbed, especially at the nonelite level. For centuries after the conquest, the essential traits of the cultural makeup, from behavioral norms to burial customs, from spoken language to vernacular architecture, followed their own trajectory with relatively little disturbance from central interventions. Local epigraphy maintains family names and linguistic forms, while survey and excavation results show that the farming landscapes remained essentially unchanged in their economies, buildings, and tombs. No wholesale change in the modes of production is discernible, but instead we see the emergence of new economic foci tightly linked with imperial administration and its material needs. They fed the rapidly growing and changing capital, as well as the increasing numbers of those who did not produce their own food. Roman Italy was brought together and remained for a long time an alliance of local communities, ruled by landed elites, who were willing to come to a negotiated compromise with an administrative center in return for the benefits that an empire involved. It was neither nation-state nor satrapy. It was a geographical and cultural space that was already tightly knit together before it was unified. Its leaders came from a variety of backgrounds and engaged in long and intense negotiation. As a result of their interaction, many of them willingly or not too grudgingly accepted a grand bargain that created an overarching administrative superstructure. It would act on their behalf on the global scene and they would all have an opportunity to become an important part of it. Thus came into existence one of the most successful regional powers in human history.

The picture painted so far portrays a specific two-century phase in central Mediterranean history. It presents an alternate scenario for the unification of Italian polities and for its immediate aftermath, down to the Hannibalic War. It cannot of course claim any validity for what happened afterwards in Italy and in the rest of the empire. At the same time, it has to be noted that those who were willing to accept its fundamental vision of the nature of

early Roman expansion would necessarily have to take it into account when interpreting the periods that followed. Our view of the late republican and early Imperial developments could be significantly impacted if their historical preconditions were radically different. Elements of continuity can certainly be found in the way local aristocrats in Italy and in other urbanized areas interacted with the central power. One of the aims of this book is precisely to challenge specialists of later periods and other regions to engage with the new concepts, mechanisms and causalities reconstructed here.

More broadly, just the possibility that one iconic instance of ancient imperialism can be reconceived by recognizing the powerful agency of the incorporated people has the potential to expand and enrich the comparative debate on premodern empires. Teasing out the multiple private agendas that resulted in the formation of a new state can provide an interesting example of how the exclusive reliance on political abstractions can lead to overlooking the more profound causal links in the process of expansion. Finally, questioning and taking down one of the most established pillars of Western ideology can advance the difficult, ongoing intellectual process of normalizing the study of what we still call the classical world. If this book succeeds in stimulating further, unconventional debate in any of these areas, it will have accomplished much of what its original intent was.

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